the Flying Dream
Six Stories & a Play
by
David Coddon

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"To have faith is to have wings."

—J.M. Barrie

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Not A Day Goes By

When "love" is reduced to "warm regards," all is lost.

It is the first anniversary of the death of my marriage. *"Hope you are well,"* read the card she sent. *"Warm regards, Jan."*

In times like these, I search for peace of mind, if not revelatory insight, by walking the beach. At around this time of day, with the tide low and the footing at the water's edge firm. The weary sun descends toward the misty horizon. The air is redolent and evocative of the sea, the proverbial cradle of life.

I am aware, as I trudge southward with the remnants of waves washed ashore caressing my bare feet, of my oppressive fatigue. My body is heavy with the unforgiving weight of days and nights not far enough in the past to relent.

Artists, it is routinely observed, and writers in particular among artists, find prolificacy in their pain. They also, it is routinely observed, toil in solitude. Loneliness is a byproduct of making art.

Burying my feet in the cool sand up to my ankles, I settle in about 50 yards from the shore in possession of a spiral notebook frayed from false starts, a ballpoint pen visibly running low on blue ink and the title for an anthology – "Vista In The Wind" – that needs a book attached to it: characters, conflict, setting, the works. I've got dozens of untethered titles awaiting

novels or at least stories; provocative, manfully conceived titles, too: "The Threshold." "They Jumped So High, They Hit the Sky." "A Parliament Of One."

I cross out "Vista In The Wind" in my fading blue ink and scribble below it: "Warm Regards."

It won't be long before I will no longer be able to afford residency at Hotel Marisol. This morning I found a note shoved beneath my door informing me that I was a week's past due on my long-term rent. Little wonder that they'd like me out of here. Tourist season will begin in earnest in a couple of weeks and they can get twice or even three times what I'm paying for this same mini-suite of rooms on the second floor.

They should be more understanding. I'm a model tenant. The most "noise" I make is typing on a laptop computer, even if at all hours of the night. Some might consider me a "celebrity" of sorts too, at least in literary circles. I'm a regular at Bay Books on Orange Avenue where you can customarily find me browsing the latest arrivals in fiction or among the attendees on author speaking nights. I've been recognized by repeat customers on the patio of the Tent City Café around the corner from the Marisol where I sometimes sit with pen and pad, working out ideas that may or may not come to fruition. At the local public library, books of stories of mine occupy almost a fifth of a shelf in the "Short Fiction" section. Possibly that's nothing to brag about.

Since Jan walked out I've been more lonely than introspective, and that's a fact. Whoever said that a writer must toil in solitude never awoke by themselves in a king-sized bed, rolled over and clutched at nothing. Or spent long, silent days staring at a cursor blinking from an accusatory personal-computer screen: "DON'T JUST SIT THERE. WRITE!" it seems to say.

I've been thinking about writing the story of Jan and me. "Mood Piece" is the tentative title. I can't commit.

Neither could she.

It occurs to me that I have difficulty with titles.

Tell someone you're a novelist and immediately that someone is impressed. A novel isn't just a piece of writing, it's an achievement. It's a book! It's a literary leviathan.

Tell someone you write short stories and you know what they think? That you couldn't commit. You couldn't write an entire novel so you took your idea, condensed it for convenience's sake and called it a short story. Same blueprint: a beginning, middle and an end, but far fewer pages. Not a leviathan at all.

This runs contrary to the history in literature of prodigious and even immortal short story writers. Poe wrote one novel in his life. Kafka never wrote what was to be considered a full novel. With all due respect to the great "The Catcher in The Rye," Salinger's best writing was his short stories.

A short story after all isn't evidence that a writer can't commit to a novel or that he or she is lazy or insufficiently inspired to write more. It's the writer at his or her purest self. A narrative stripped of all heft and excess, a … but then I go on. This is why writers are often regarded as ponderous or pretentious or in real life dull outside of their written pages. They teach and preach.

Not me. Not today.

A writer who lives on an island is blessed. Yes, I do live on an island, though Coronado, across the bay from downtown San Diego, isn't always thought of as one. And yet I feel removed from urban life and instead part of a community: retirees and tourists by day, wanderers and bar-hoppers in Navy whites by dusk and in darkness.

That's my favorite time to wander.

I may start out seated at a bench just down the street from the Marisol in Star Park.

Coronado's most famous writer, L. Frank Baum, had resided for a time on Star Park Circle, just down Park Place from me, and due south a few hundred feet. An unassuming yellow house with blue shutters on the

windows upstairs and down, a sunny porch and a fine green lawn, it's now occupied by someone who doesn't appreciate gawkers or curiosity seekers, and likely not other writers. I'd never gone within 10 feet of it – just eyed it from the sanctity of the park across the way and imagined a day when Baum himself did indeed summer there and permit his imagination to run wild.

He had written: *"Whenever I feel blue, I start breathing again."*

In full breath, and after no more than 15 minutes' worth of idly observing the people walking dogs or the women in athleisure-wear practicing tai chi on the grass or reflecting on the yellow house, I am up, on my feet, and on my way to Orange Avenue and new discoveries.

When Jan and I used to walk the island city's main drag we did so paying little attention to the tourist-oriented shops on our right if we were walking south, or on our left if we were walking north. We were immersed rather in conversation, not always about issues or matters of consequence, but whatever crossed our minds at the time. She is a deep thinker, a person with perpetual curiosity about her world. I'm the same. Together we would ask the questions "Why?" "How?" "I wonder?"

Aloneness. Not what I counted on.

Around the corner from my hotel, the indoor/outdoor café Tent City boasts a full complement of customers sitting outside on the cool, yet humid evening. I recognize among those on the patio the goateed server who more than occasionally had waited on Jan and me when we'd visited from San Diego. He must have been aware that I was residing, temporarily, at the Hotel Marisol, because I've walked past the café practically every evening though I'd never sat down or gone inside for food or drink.

Kent, I believe his name is. An affable fellow who had told us once that he was an aspiring actor and had performed at a theater across the bay in several productions, including a musical. A revival of "Merrily We Roll Along," I think?

I hear somewhere in the recesses of my memory Sondheim's "Not A Day Goes By" from that underappreciated show:

"Not a day goes by / not a single day

"But you're somewhere a part of my life

"And it looks like you'll stay

"As the days go by / I keep thinking when does it end

"Where's the day I'll have started forgetting

"But I just go on thinking and sweating ..."

Kent looks up from the order he is taking. His eyes, behind thin wire-rim glasses, brighten and he proffers a short wave.

I nod.

The tourists, conspicuous in their souvenir T-shirts, Bermuda shorts, flip-flops and tote bags with the names of village shops embossed on them, parade up and down the wide sidewalk on the south side of Orange where I promenade, the vestiges of Sondheim still haunting me, the smiles of my Jan still possessing me, the unstarted and therefore unfinished pages of "Mood Piece" berating me.

Though only five minutes from my pensione, I've abandoned on this walk as I do for diversion on a regular basis the peace, quiet and privacy of the Star Park neighborhood for the comparative bustle of business in Coronado: the cafes, the bars, the boutiques, the candy store, the trinkets shops, the historic Spreckels Building with its stately columns and dignified veneer in front of which bankers banked, theatergoers queued up for the theater and consumers of history reveled in the past as presented by the local historical society.

Hands deep in my pockets, I navigate the crowds and bask in the breeze against my face. It carries on it the briny scent of the nearby Pacific.

I will miss this when I return to the other side of the bridge, to the "big city" that long ago lost enchantment for me.

The literary agency in New York underwent a personnel upheaval and a new representative has been assigned to me. After seven years working with Ted Morey, who was affable and low-pressure and nearly as interested in golf as he was in my short stories – but very good at his job! – I am now the concern of one Margaret Strom. Just three years out of Brown University and hungry to make a name for herself in the book business and assertive with a capital A, she set up a Zoom meeting with me the first day of our agent/author relationship. She told me, rather breathlessly, that she planned to undertake a reinvention of my representation with the express goal of getting my stories into non-traditional venues online such as on the interface app Wattpad, the digital magazine Lightspeed and even on a podcast site that offers live audio readings of works by various writers.

"In a month you'll be read by people who didn't even know who you were before," she'd gushed, I assumed not intending that to sound as disparaging as it did.

It was hard to argue with someone with the enthusiasm of Ms. Strom and it'd pleased me that she had indeed read much of my work.

Her name lights up on the face of my phone as I unlock the door to my hotel room early that evening. 6:15 my time, 9:15 hers. She works late hours.

"Mr. Eagleton," she states, acknowledging me when I answer. All business.

"Ms. Strom," I reciprocate, hoping she will not take that as an affront.

She doesn't. Back to business. "'Reading Between the Lines,'" she says. "Beau Yogerst's podcast? When would you be available to do an interview?"

"I didn't know I had anything to be interviewed about," I say, stepping into the dimly lit confines of my hotel room and reaching for a lamp's light switch. "The new anthology," I continue, seeing the messy state of things that I'd left behind when I took off for my walk, "doesn't even have a title yet."

"Nothing wrong with that, Mr. Eagleton." She is unfazed. "You can discuss your work in progress. As you know, authors do it all the time."

What follows are details about what days and what times are available. I field all of this patiently, remaining, as to mirror Margaret Strom, cool, confident, efficient and strictly unemotional.

We come to terms on a week away, 4 in the afternoon Southern California time.

Margaret pronounces "Fine. Thank you," and she is gone.

There is no reason for it, but as I set my phone down, re-examine the aforementioned mess and sink into a relatively forgiving cushioned chair, it hits me that at the moment nothing really means a damn.

I'd fallen asleep on the little couch that doesn't even accommodate the length of my body without my feet hanging over one side and my head bolstered by a stiff arm rest at the other end. An open blue notebook, pen resting in the middle, lays on my chest when I open my eyes and try to re-orient myself. No light shines through the drawn drapes that face the street, so apparently I haven't slept the night through.

Reaching for my phone from the coffee table parallel to the couch, I finger for it only to have it fall to the floor. It buzzes almost immediately.

Margaret Strom again?

Groggy, I swing my legs over the front of the couch, stoop down and pick up the phone. POTENTIAL SPAM it reads.

Above that: 11:08 p.m.

Over three hours "napping" and now, like it or not, I am wide awake. I'll never be able to get into bed and sleep a night through.

I make my way to the street – this time northbound on Orange Avenue. I prefer shops closed to open, and at this hour, with midnight beckoning, none are open. Italian restaurant with red and green awning above neon

sign: closed. Thrifty Drug Store with the month's specials plastered over the picture window in front: closed. Luggage store with "See the World, Be the World" stenciled over its glass: closed.

Starbucks, green, white and glossy: closed.

Centered on the window glass is the vaguely smiling, crowned, two-tailed Siren emblematic of the coffee company, her twin tresses of long hair draped over and hiding, presumably, her bare breasts.

I've stopped here to gaze upon this most familiar image, possibly reacquainting myself with the simplest of realities, with corporate America, with an enduring symbol of a social ritual.

Behind me mere patches of traffic move up and down Orange Avenue at this late hour. Somewhere in the thin air can be heard live music being performed in a night spot up the street. A young man on a skateboard passes behind me with a screech of ball-bearing wheels against sidewalk concrete.

Startled, I turn around.

Then, behind me, I hear: "Warm regards, Stephen Eagleton."

The words throw me. The dulcet female voice, like some amalgam of Amazon Alexa and Ava Gardner, throws me.

There is no one there in front of the Starbucks window as I spin about again. I must have heard, in my head, Jan speaking to me, though the voice hadn't sounded like hers. A moment of anxiety overcomes me; have I sleepwalked from the hotel to here and found myself still in a kind of fever dream?

If only the damned coffee shop was open – I could go inside, order a triple-shot espresso and ensure myself that I am awake.

I mean, for Christ's sake, no one uses words like "Warm regards" out loud. Only the nostalgists, or in my case the cynics, use it in their writing anymore. But once you plant something like that in your mind it takes on a life of its own. That had to be the reason for this.

"I don't need coffee," I mutter aloud. "I suppose I need more sleep after all."

"Perchance to dream?"

The same voice. The same goddamned voice. This time straight ahead of me. This time coming at me directly from that storefront window.

I would have sworn, not asleep but wide awake, that the lips of The Siren twitched from that Mona Lisa smile into something wider, something wiser, something alive. I stare at this familiar, ubiquitous company logo for two or three minutes.

Then I tread back to the hotel.

Because I'd slept, walked around in the late night ocean spray and then tried to sleep again, I feel no good to anyone, especially myself, the following morning. Resolved to banish the last 12 restless hours or so from my head, I get up, shower and immediately begin packing for the return trip across the bridge, across the bay and eventually to the Golden Hill Craftsman house that I now live in alone.

Before I close my laptop and power down I change the title of my anthology-in-progress from "Warm Regards" back to "Vista in the Wind." That should inspire me to delay my departure, sit down at the custom secretary desk in the hotel room and resume writing.

It doesn't.

The thin young woman behind the desk in the lobby seems genuinely disappointed that I am checking out, to the extent that she offers me a "bonus night" at the Marisol for half the rate I'd been paying. I am tempted, though it would mean unpacking what I'd just packed, rearranging the day ahead such as it is and challenging myself again to do what I should be doing at this moment anyway – writing.

I tell her no thank you. It is a kind and generous offer but this "staycation" has served me well and the time has come to get home and attend to things there. As if she intuits that "home" isn't for me what it used to be, her

earlier disappointment becomes a veritable pout, but she wishes me a "great day" just the same.

These are the "rules" of writing: Once you've attained momentum, don't let go of it. As is loosely attributed to Einstein, imagination is more important than knowledge. There is no such thing as one draft. Beginnings are just as critical as endings. There are no ORIGINAL thoughts or ideas – everything is contrast and compare. Truth is not better than fiction, but then fiction is not better than truth. Truth is what you create – your truth. Let go when the time for letting go comes; don't deny it. You are your characters, all of them. Anything can and will happen when you are liberated from the shackles of convention and expectation. You are what you write. Everything deserved is meaningless.

My office, on the second floor of the house where the desk and the big-screen computer face the picture window looking out at the quiet street through branches of jacarandas, has awaited me -- silent and odorless. Swinging the strap of my soft leather briefcase around the back of the wheeled chair, I sink down into the worn cushion that covers its seat and, along with an ergonomic support behind me, protect my back from the rigors of "writing every day" as the book says. (This is not one of my writing rules, however.)

I glance over the top of the computer, out the dusty window, through the jacarandas and across the street where an orange tabby cat has sprung onto the roof of a parked sedan, stretched and is posing regally with tufted ears erect and head high. When a crow flutters past it, having alit from a power line, the cat's right paw swats the air.

Another writing "rule": always be an observer and remember that art may imitate life only so far.

So completely silent is the Golden Hill house that I wish, sitting in front of my blank screen, that Jan and I had adopted a dog or cat somewhere along the line after our son and daughter left us empty nesters many years ago.

My cell phone rests on the desktop to my left. I lift it up, scrutinize the digital time displayed over the generic seashore screen saver. It has been a long day. An hour to pack that should have required 15 minutes, a coffee and roll at Tent City, a drive in traffic over the bridge and now sitting … upstairs in the window to my Golden Hill world such as it is.

I set the phone down. At least Margaret Strom should have called by now. Checking on my output for the day. Perhaps better that she hasn't called. What if I were to call Jan? In Berkeley? Would she answer? Of course, she wouldn't ignore an incoming call with my face accompanying it. She'd say … she'd say: "Warm regards, Stephen."

It is sometime after 10 that same evening when I slide into a parallel parking space on Orange Avenue just two shops down from the Starbucks. Both street and sidewalk traffic are livelier than when I'd been in this vicinity the night before.

As before the coffee shop is closed up tight. An orange flier for an upcoming art show in Spreckels Park pasted to the glass above the door handle is the only thing that has changed in 24 hours.

The attention I give the flier, including all the small-print details beneath a rendering of an artist in beret sitting before an easel, paintbrush in hand, lasts just seconds. I am looking directly at the Siren.

I decide in a heartbeat that I've lost it. I've driven all the way back to Coronado, all the way here, and for what? What in hell is wrong with me?

I can't write. Damn it. I can't write.

"Yes you can, Stephen. You can write."

The crayon-green eyes flash. The Mona Lisa smile twitches.

"You did speak to me," I say, easing closer to the window glass. "I heard you."

The figure's stenciled mouth doesn't change, but I hear distinctly *"Ita possum dicere."*

A chatting couple in matching San Diego Padres warmup jackets and shorts pass by me, arms locked. They pay me no attention.

I am processing the unfamiliar language I've just heard from the window glass – Latin?

The phone in my inside jacket pocket plays its incoming call tune. I quickly pull it free.

"POTENTIAL SPAM" it reads. Damn it again.

As I shove with exasperation the phone back into my pocket I swear I see the Siren's lips move: *"Caldium respicit,"* I hear.

Then the green eyes blink like shutters quickly opening and closing, and there is definite movement of her shoulders and the tresses of hair flowing down over each begin to oscillate. The Mona Lisa smile that had twitched now widens.

"You're alive," I gasp, and I am unsteady on my feet. "Or … or I'm hallucinating."

This time when the image speaks to me it does so in clear, plain English and no, she doesn't sound like Ava Gardner or Amazon's Alexa or some other recorded female voice. It is a voice I've never heard before – soft and modulated but as airy and natural as any that I'd imagined for any woman character I've ever created, as affecting as any woman I've ever loved. In this private world on a public street in neon shadows of darkness, we now speak to one another.

"You're not hallucinating, Stephen," the Siren says.

"But," I begin. "This is impossible."

If the image could have blushed it might have at that moment. "I don't think so."

It doesn't even occur to me to glance around or behind me, to see whether a passer-by might have encountered this nut talking to a glass storefront on a closed-up Friday night in an island tourist town. Or that anyone else could be experiencing what I am experiencing.

"Why do you doubt your senses, Stephen?"

My heart by this time has stopped racing. I've somehow accepted this and clarity of a sort has come with that.

"Isn't that," I say, calmly now, "what Marley's Ghost asked Scrooge?"

"You live," it says, "in stories. And they live in you, Stephen."

"I'm a writer."

"And a reader."

I blanch. "Never mind me. You're not going to try to sell me an Americano are you?"

"No."

"Then …" I point at her. "What's this all about?"

"Your reclamation."

"More Dickens?" I ask. "Really?"

She does not answer.

So what? This is my own personal "Christmas Carol" story? In September? What do I require reclamation for or from? It has to be that all of this is unfolding in my head. Fever dream, remember?

The smile wanes. "*Dimitte te.*"

"What does that mean?"

"Forgive yourself."

"Forgive myself? For what?" I am affronted.

Conscious of the silence, I wait for an answer.

The sharp, intruding blast of a truck horn on the street behind me coincides with that affront. "What is it?" I cry out at the image on the glass.

It … she … whatever does not move or speak.

The "rules" of writing, 2: Even if you draw from your own experiences – "Write what you know!" writing teachers say – fiction may depart from reality. Depart it should. Depart it will. It's all right to become emotionally

involved with the words, but emotion can be a double-edged sword. It can stab right through you. As so-called therapy, writing is valuable, but like any therapy it should not be permitted to become a crutch. Sometimes writing is a battle and there is no clear winner.

I'd parked in front of a late-night coffeehouse in my neighborhood – not a Starbucks – but hadn't gone in. Instead I sit quietly in the front seat of my car, behind the steering wheel, breathing steadily. A misty fog has enshrouded Golden Hill at this hour and already the windshield before me is coated with condensation. To the extent that I can through the fog, I observe the lit doorway of the neighborhood late-night coffeehouse, a spot I've been inside only once before and which is generally frequented by young people responsibly sobering up after time spent in one of the bars further down the street. Or by the lonely.

I am not predisposed to being among either.

I've never written a short story in first-person point of view. Not once. Too insular, I decided. Too limiting. Too egotistical. I am not about to start with anything that comprised "Vista in the Wind." Or "Warm Regards." Whatever it is to ultimately be called, if completed.

Am wondering: If I sit here long enough, will someone come over, tap on the window and, if I roll it down, ask me if I am all right?

If they do, I don't know what I'd say.

Wondering this too: why Jan seemed to become another person on that fateful weekend getaway we took to Carmel by the Sea. From the moment I opened the passenger car door for her to let her out in front of the Ocean Street inn, the one with the blue candles aflame in the window, she'd been someone else, someone I didn't know, someone I would learn who no longer loved me.

I drive home. Just a couple of minutes' drive. But in that couple of minutes driving I think about whether a short story about a frustrated writer who imagines a corporate logo is talking to him is worth the effort. Probably

not, but I vow one thing as I pull into my dark, dank garage: I will never set foot in a Starbucks again.

But then, as I unlock the front door it strikes me … what if when the frustrated writer got home, opened the door and clicked on a lamp to break the darkness, he found the Siren sitting in his easy chair, her two fishy tails stretched out across the carpet?

When I do click on the lamp in the foyer, it is with a degree of trepidation. Nothing though. The living room "greets" me as if frozen in time: blue couch with the three matching cushions, glass-top coffee table adorned with now out-of-date magazines, grandfather clock that no longer works, credenza of books gathering dust, easy chair unoccupied.

I make myself a stiff Scotch, something I don't usually do, then pluck "Dickens' Short Stories" from the shelf and retreat upstairs to bed.

Never read a word.

I lie in bed with the reading light attached to the headboard snaking down over me and instead of reading I command out loud: "Alexa. Play 'Not A Day Goes By.'"

The voice repeats the title, tells me Bernadette Peters is the vocalist. I close my eyes and listen for the next four and a half minutes.

"Not a day goes by / not a blessed day

"But you're still somehow part of my life

"And you won't go away

"So there's hell to pay

"And until I die

"I'll die day after day after day …"

I phone Jan's number, and to my surprise she answers on the first ring.

"Stephen? Is everything all right?"

Unprepared in my own mind, I can only manage "Uh yes. Jan, are you all right?"

"Of course. I'm fine. I didn't expect …"

"A call from me? I'm sorry, I just had this inclination. And I wanted to hear your voice."

When she does not respond to this, I start to regret the impulse or, as I'd said, the "inclination."

So we make trivial conversation, a smoke screen for the tension that emanates from one cell phone tower to another. Inevitably we speak of the "kids" and then, when the awkwardness ramps up, of what we've been doing lately. Still studying for her doula certification, she says. Adjunct teaching for the Mills College performing arts department. "Decompressing."

"You, Stephen?"

"Working," I exaggerate. Then I am unable to resist. "And hallucinating."

"What??"

I offer something that probably makes even less sense as the call I initiated continues to deteriorate. Yet haplessness suddenly gives way to pain and I swallow whatever alibi comment I was about to make.

"Have you been drinking?" she asks.

"No."

"I think," Jan says with a breath, "we should say goodnight now, Stephen."

"You're right. Jan. We should. Goodnight."

Through my bedroom window I can see the rising moon, nearly full, a pale ashen shade, seemingly alone in the inky sky. I think of the words of Chekhov -- *"Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass."*

Rules of writing 3: Never change tenses in midstream. Never end a story with a dream.

I'm standing, in the Litchfield Town Green, beneath maple trees and feeling rays of sun through their stately branches. That cool, bracing breeze that whisks through Connecticut in autumn is in my hair and beard. As a boy I used to come here to play with friends or on rare occasions to throw a baseball back and forth with my father.

As a young man, before I went off to the university, I would walk hand in hand with a perfumed someone indulgent of my foolish philosophizing or my meek, memorized poetry. I was never a poet.

Strange, that I am alone here. This is what, the middle of the day? No children playing. No lovers hand in hand. No birds in the oaks, maples and ashes. No dogs being walked or babies strollered. The village green is neither the playground nor sanctuary I want it to be. It's beautiful. It's forsaken though in spite of its beauty and, for now, so am I.

"*Non solum*, Stephen."

"What? Who's there?"

The Siren sits in the middle of the green, her twin tails wrapped around her. She is a good distance away but I hear her voice as though she's in my ear.

"*Non solum*. You are not alone, dear boy."

Dear boy? Who ever called me that?

She is smiling that confident but somewhat guarded Mona Lisa smile. The sun is glinting off the top of her crown, where the star sits.

I walk toward the Siren. With each step forward her presence, her being fades just a little more.

I stop what I believe is three feet away.

What's left of her nods at me. "Warm regards," she says.

Then she is gone.

I wake up and when I do my eyes are moist.

The Flying Dream

End songs

"The End"

"It's the End of the World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)"

"The Final Countdown"

"The End is the Beginning is The End"

"Don't Fear the Reaper"

It was less than ideal, teaching a journalism class of 75 students in a classroom ensconced in the college's musty music building. It meant that morning lectures were often delivered accompanied by the sound of a trumpeter playing scales, on or off key, on the other side of the wall behind the podium, or by the hum of a vocal chorale from above, just slightly vibrating the popcorn ceiling.

Other times, it was quiet. No rehearsals. No coinciding classes. No music shared through connecting doors.

Arriving 15 minutes before class time and five minutes earlier than normal, Alexis Trask, mid-career professor of digital media, stopped in the sterile hallway on the first floor of the Talman Music Building outside the door to Classroom 110A. She grasped the doorknob. She heard the playing of a piano inside.

Yes, there was an old spinet at the front of the room, but in the many times Alexis had taught in 110A she'd never seen anyone seated at it, much less playing it. She'd even wondered, fleetingly, if it was considered too ancient for current, more discriminating music students, banished to this classroom given over to other academic disciplines such as her own, there to gather dust for antiquity and likely not tuned.

Through the small, square window high in the door she glimpsed a young man seated at the spinet, his tousled head facing down and his sharply focused eyes watching his hands on the keyboard as he played. Alexis thought better of interrupting, but it was almost 10 minutes to the hour, customarily the time that she set up for the day's lesson behind her SMART podium and the time when her students began trickling into the room.

So in she went.

The young man looked up and his orange hair fell unevenly across his forehead.

"Go ahead," the professor offered with a gesture toward the piano. "Keep playing. Class doesn't begin for a while yet."

A visible Adam's apple gulp and a tentative nod later, the student was playing as he was before -- meticulous, private, possibly somewhere far away in his thoughts.

As she lay her briefcase on a table behind the podium, turned and pushed the requisite buttons to fire up the in-class technology system, Alexis actively listened to the music coming from the spinet and, as its minor chords and arpeggios simultaneously calmed and tantalized her, tried to recognize the piece. She was no musicologist but it resided somewhere between classical and pop, reminding her of works such as Chopin's Prelude in C Minor.

The first few of her students appeared, coming in through a rear door to the classroom and moving uncertainly at the sight of the young man playing the piano as though they'd intruded on a recital or lesson. Alexis beckoned them in with a wave.

A patter of rain brushed the classroom windows, hinting at what might be the first storm of March.

The young man stopped playing and the bench beneath him skidded against the cold floor as he pushed away from the spinet. He looked toward Alexis at the podium.

"That's a beautiful piece," she told him. "Who's it by?"

"It's mine," the young man said almost as though apologizing. "I wrote it."

"Really?"

Half of the handful of students seated in the classroom clapped; Alexis felt like doing so herself.

The young man managed a diffident smile. With a nod toward the professor in the high-neck sweater, fashionable blazer and midi skirt, he rose, took the sheet of music from the piano and left quietly.

Soon the class proceeded.

For the first five minutes of her lecture, Alexis addressed her students having been uncannily soothed by the young man's piano composition. She felt, regarding the stony faces in aisles and rows that stretched front to back, less annoyance than usual with their morning apathy, and more at peace with the part of herself not identified with what she did for a living.

This morning's lecture had to do with ethical responsibility, an area that onetime media professionals like herself and those of the future in this very room were compelled to take seriously and address responsibly. The virulent salvoes of politicians and the conspiracy theories of the fringe threatened all who practiced what she'd practiced for so many years and still held dear.

She was 15 minutes into the lecture and just beginning to solicit comments from her students when Alexis heard her cell phone buzzing within her inner blazer pocket. As a rule, she never checked an incoming call during a class – it set the worst possible example for those in her instruction, they for whom their phones was an appendage and BFF.

But when after ignoring the calls in two separate sequences the phone buzzed a third time, Alexis made a show of stepping behind the podium again as if to adjust the Power Point aglow on the classroom screen. When she got there, she removed the phone from her blazer pocket, set it flat on the podium and examined her department chair's face and phone number on the Android screen. At the same time a text notice flickered that read URGENT.

Alexis looked tentatively up at her class. "Excuse me a moment, everybody. This is a call that I have to take. I'll be right back."

She heard their murmuring as she stepped away from the podium, strode to the side door and slid out into the sterile hallway.

Charles Brower, chair of the communications department, spoke almost immediately on the other end of the line: "Alex?" he said, calling her by her nickname as most did in the department. "I think you'd better plan on taking your classes online. Immediately. For at least a couple of weeks."

Such a directive, drastic as it sounded, didn't completely throw Alexis off-guard. Brower, a chronically anxious individual qualified though he was in his field, was known in department circles as "Charlie Brown." Some sky was always falling.

"What's this all about, Charlie?" Alexis, nonetheless curious, asked.

"The coronavirus," she was told, without emotion.

The same day the announcement from the governor came down:

"To protect public health, I as State Public Health Officer and Director of the California Department of Public Health order all individuals living in the State of California to stay home or at their place of residence except

as needed to maintain continuity of operations of the federal critical infrastructure sectors ..."

It ended with: "In witness whereof I have here unto set my hand and caused the Great Seal of the State of California to be affixed this 19th day of March 2020." Signature.

The following morning would be the first of many exactly like it. Shortly after rising she took up her phone, went to CNN.com and was met with a bold headline about the spread of a virus, worldwide, that no one understood. A cases count and a death toll scoreboard would follow in the ensuing days.

April 1: 215,000 U.S. cases. Deaths, 5,000 and counting.

The governor had said that "Home isolation is not my preferred choice but it is a necessary one. This is not a permanent state, this is a moment in time."

She felt the *aloneness.*

Face Time

"I'm all right, Mom. What could happen to me holed up in my place? Right?"

"Don't be facetious, Alexis. This virus can go through walls, you know."

"Go through walls? Where did you hear that?"

"It's on the news. Aren't you watching?"

"I'm trying not to, Mom. It's scary and it's depressing."

"You look thinner. Have you been eating?"

"That's the Facetime camera, Mom. Of course I've been eating. There's not a lot else to do besides eating."

"Your work."

"I'm doing that, yes. But it only takes so much of the day. The rest of the time it's sitting and thinking. More than I'd like to."

"You could be watching the news."

"Mother. Please?"

Alexis dreamed of Rags, the cheery mixed-breed dog who had been her faithful companion for almost 15 years through the proverbial thick and thin – through a serious illness, through a marriage and divorce, and through innumerable happy days as well. The loss of Rags the previous summer, which had been excruciating at the time, flooded back and consumed every empty, unoccupied space in Alexis' downtown condominium apartment. His absence was conspicuous: At the floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the community pool. At the door where the dog unfailingly waited for her to come home every day. At the foot of her bed where he slept.

When she stood over her coffeemaker the following morning she heard in her head the vestiges of the melody the orange-haired music student in her classroom had made, and then the excited panting that the dog used to make on its way to join her in the kitchen each new day. Alexis chased with all her might the quick, intruding memory of being in the veterinarian's examination room when she had to …

The silence inside her home was oppressive. A cough that sounded through the screen door that led to the third-floor balcony patio had the suddenness of a gunshot. Coughs were, everyone was told, potentially deadly now.

Coffee brewed and now steaming over the surface of the cup that she carried to the sliding screen door, Alexis gazed across the way at a facing balcony of an adjacent building in the complex. A goateed man and two young children – she didn't know them – sat outside and talked and maybe played and paid little attention to the nothing going on beyond and below.

She saw them out there on the balcony most mornings afterward for weeks. Neither she nor they acknowledged one another. Then one morning they weren't there and she never saw them again.

Her lectures she conducted using the Zoom video-meeting platform, which had become the connective thread between educators, workers and families around the country and around what world was able to afford its technology. The ritual of sitting down in front of her desktop computer screen and speaking to rows and rows of black squares with names in white printed across them made Alexis suffer a little more each school day. Few of her students participated with their voices. Even fewer turned their cameras on to show her their faces. As the spring semester crawled onward, attendance plummeted further and further. Some days half the class failed to show up in the virtual room.

The occasional remote faculty meeting wasn't much more immersive. She learned the convenience and privacy of turning off her own camera as well.

So stultifying and numbly terrifying had the month of March been that April was little relief. With no social agenda for the day, each one felt 48 hours' long. Daytime was worse – the muffled sounds of neighbors in the hallway outside her door meager evidence at best that the human race still existed in her midst.

Wearing a mask, she eventually made her way outside to explore the world as it was: the wide, empty streets and silent office buildings and the skyscraping hotels with their rows of dead windows; the spectral strangers in their masks or scarves who crossed the street to the other side when they approached her; the crosswalks that did not demand looking both ways before proceeding; the very few parked cars on either side of the downtown street she lived on.

But for the birds singing in the trees as if immune to the terror, and the whisk of the wind, there was complete and shuddering quiet.

Between classes and on weekends -- though every day was the same, there was no real weekend – Alexis would go about her indoor isolation with her Echo device playing a Frank Sinatra album. The sadder the more appropriate. "In the Wee Small Hours." "Close To You." "Where Are You?" "For Only the Lonely." "No One Cares." "Point of No Return." "All Alone."

At some point, she'd sink into her favorite living room chair, close her eyes, listen to the silken often sad vocals and daydream that she was far away and free, living in a time other than this one.

Not paying attention to the news, as her mother had advised her to do, was really not an option. She was a teacher of journalism. How could she not stay up on what was happening in the world, COVID-19 and otherwise? She'd have to force herself to watch or at least read.

Someday this would be a case study for a class or a topic for a research paper, about how the global media covered something this vast, this deadly, this inscrutable. If she wanted to maintain her position with the college, she couldn't allow herself to fall behind.

About now most people, at least in her neighborhood, were wearing protective masks over their faces. Good for health maintenance, she considered, but up close everyone's eyes appeared sinister to her. If this went on long enough the time would come when everyone, all of them, herself included, would be EYES EYES EYES and nothing more.

The stuff of bad dreams.

She was buoyed in the evenings, at exactly 8 p.m., by what had become a ritual in the high-rise condo buildings across from her own: people out on their balconies or on the rooftops banging pots and pans or cheering in salute to the health care workers around the country who were putting their

lives seriously on the line. Alexis foraged in her kitchen for pots and pans of her own that could withstand the well-intentioned abuse every night. Found none. So she ferreted from out of her bedroom closet a noisemaker left over from some bygone New Year's Eve celebration. It became her own personal contribution to the nightly tribute and, for a few weeks, a communal lifeline to the others locked in and locked away.

Going to the grocery store or to get takeout from a restaurant trying to survive by providing it became a covert operation: cover every part of your breathable, exposable body; arrive in the case of the market early in the morning or at closing time to minimize the possibility of proximity to other human beings; wipe down whatever you brought home, then wipe it down again.

Zoom

"These are office hours, everyone. I'll work with you one at a time, so you'll remain on queue in the waiting room until I've finished with the student ahead of you. Please be patient. I'll get to each of you before our two hours is up today."

"ZOOM IS DEDICATED TO DELIVERING HAPPINESS."

"I don't know how to do this assignment, Professor. No one's in their office. And if they agree to be interviewed … like this … it freaks me out. My face and their face – so close up."

"Try doing your interviews on the phone, Hailey. It'll work just as well and you won't have any of those concerns."

"The phone's OK?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"How about email?"

"Do NOT interview people for stories using email, Hailey. You can't even be certain that's them on the other end."

"I hate this."

"Take it easy. Just do the best you can. That's all I ask."

Until the day one of her students messaged her that she'd contracted the COVID-19 virus, Alexis hadn't known personally anyone infected. This would change – day by day, week by week, consistently until while she didn't know more people infected than not infected, she knew enough to confirm what the governor had told his constituents: Sooner or later, everyone will test positive for COVID-19. It's simple mathematics.

The world may have been paralyzed, but the plague catalyzed social media, which lit up with angst, irony, home-made videos, pet photos, cooking tips, vaccine suggestions, conspiracy talk, hate and very little love.

There was, Alexis discovered succumbing to Facebook and Twitter, some sense of humor amid the suffering and rancor. One wit had suggested that people were having one of three responses to pandemic isolation (and the choices rhymed): FUNK. DRUNK. CHUNK.

Alexis considered this at the moment. She didn't feel as if she'd altered her eating habits, such as eating out of boredom, at all. If anything, her reticence about going to the market, coupled with the overpricing of delivery services, meant she was eating less, not more.

While she was accustomed to keeping a bottle of wine in the house and having several glasses a week, usually to reward herself after a long session of grading, she didn't increase that frequency either. From the time she was a young adult, she'd accepted the fact that alcohol was a depressant.

Which brought her to FUNK. Undeniably, she felt the mental and psychological strain of being inside most of the time, of not being among other people (such as her students) and of fighting to ignore worst-case scenarios that hovered over her and others' lives like low black clouds. She

sought refuge in the treadmill in her office, in listening to music, in Netflix. But not in others.

She'd heard of colleagues or acquaintances using this time to reconnect and catch up, either on the phone or using a platform like Skype or Zoom, with estranged friends or loved ones. This didn't feel genuine to her, and even if it had, who was there to connect with?

Her mother? Yes, obligatory.

Her sister Tamron? Busy with three children being schooled (by her and her husband) from home.

Her brother Jonah? "Archaeologing" in South America and usually without Wi-Fi or cell phone service.

Her best friend Mandy? She'd moved in with her elderly parents to safeguard them.

Her ex-husband Paul? They'd traded perfunctory "stay safe" texts. That was enough.

End of April, searching for sanity and diversion on the web. She found "Take Me to the World: A Stephen Sondheim 90th Birthday Celebration." It featured Broadway stars singing from their homes on Zoom so many of the songs that over the years had touched Alexis' heart in a way, in retrospect, that very little in her life to this point had done.

She sat at her desk in the dark, the images flickering through her computer screen, and watched and listened and felt the restorative grace of the melodies and the succor of the words, even those expressed in heartbreak. These people singing to Sondheim but also seemingly to her ceased being familiar or even famous. They reached out and she, in her lonely quiet way, reached back.

By the time the last solo in the streamed program had been sung, the reassuring truth of "No One Is Alone" from "Into the Woods," Alexis was

woozy and unsteady in her chair and holding on to the edge of the desk. But she was alive.

May 15, 2020. CNN reported on its conspicuous scoreboard that there were 1,361, 522 COVID cases in the United States. The director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases told the Senate that the estimate of 80,000 deaths in America was probably low. He added that a vaccine that could be effective was a year to two years away.

Two weeks later, the U.S. death toll exceeded 100,000.

She had finished her spring semester online and was immersed in grading papers, when not immersed in these "scoreboard" numbers. Alexis was grateful she did not teach math.

The park adjacent to her condominium complex was named for Benito Juarez. Lush and green and dappled by sunshine in the late spring, it was less populated than usual during the noon hour, as nearby office workers were no longer in their offices. A homeless man wrapped in a stained, hoary blanket slept underneath the plum tree that towered over the center portion of the park. Of the eight benches spaced out along the four perimeters, only three were occupied when Alexis came downstairs, dressed in workout clothes and carrying her Hydro Flask and phone. At the bench situated in the shade of two stately fig trees, a seated man, his face mostly covered by a pale-blue protective mask, bent over to pat the flanks of his panting gray dog.

Her first thought was: "Rags." This dog, at least from a distance, looked so much like her beloved Rags that her heart fluttered. Same poodley fir. Same floppy ears. Same snowball paws and stubby tail.

A practical minded woman by nature, Alexis was not one to interpret a coincidence such as this as a message of comfort from parts beyond. But she could be excused, she decided, given the circumstances that prevailed. How could anyone be completely practical minded when the world, as it was, was upside-down?

She found her own protective mask in the seat of her workout pants and tied it on as she found herself walking toward the man and the dog at the bench. If she spoke to them, it would be her first verbal encounter with anyone in the park in two months.

Her Kelly green Converses squeaked on the paved walkway and the dog's owner looked up. Brown on brown he was, from a distance. It sounded in her mind like she'd just made a police suspect report. There was, however, something warm and unthreatened in his eyes as she drew closer, and better still, the dog's ears rose up and it strained at the leash to meet and greet her.

It seemed a silly question when she stopped and called out: "Is your dog friendly?"

"Her tail's wagging," returned the stranger, his voice slightly muffled beneath the material of his facemask. "So you can take that as a 'yes.'"

Alexis dropped to one knee and, after setting her thermos to one side, made embracing room for the dog as, given slack on its leash, it sidled up to her, that tail in metronomic motion and long lashes circling two "love me" hazel eyes.

"She's a beauty," Alexis couldn't help saying as the dog nuzzled her face with a damp nose. "What's her name?"

The owner crossed his legs. "Roxie."

"Roxie," she repeated, scratching the animal's nape. "I have to tell you," she said to the owner, "this feels like such a … I don't know, normal thing to be doing."

"It's good to get out and enjoy the sun together," he said, throwing his arm around the back of the bench. "That's a benefit – one of many – of having a dog. Has to go out. Has to get exercise."

Alexis laughed as the dog spun about and its tail just about whipped her in the face.

"Do you have a dog?" the owner asked her.

He couldn't have known that the question was a painful one to her, though she replied "Not at the moment."

"A lot of folks are adopting right now," he said. "I hope they understand that doing so is for keeps."

Alexis came to her feet as the dog retreated toward its owner and then dived its nose into a plastic bowl of water. "How long have you had Rags?"

"Rags?"

"I mean Roxie."

"Since she was a pup. Almost two years now." He tugged at the side of his mask. "My name's Sean by the way."

"Alex," she nodded. "You live around here?"

"Two blocks that way," he said, gesturing. "The Villa Lofts."

She was relieved when he did not ask where she lived. It was better, she thought, to focus the conversation on the dog.

"Well," she said, summoning a smile that she knew he could not see beneath her mask. "It's nice to meet you."

"You too," he said.

Survival Tools

N95 masks (many)

Sanitized wipes or disinfectant

Soap

TP

Prayer

On the first day of the state shelter-in-place mandate, Sean Lawrence drove the five miles from his downtown loft to the hillside mission where some 20 years before he had discovered love.

Deserted but for one officially marked city pickup truck in the main parking lot, the verdant and immaculately manicured grounds awaited him unoccupied by other human beings. As Sean climbed out of his car he was aware of the stark aural beauty of songbirds high among the branches of acacia trees. For now, and who knew for how long, they had the park to themselves, the world to themselves.

Ahead of him as he walked, the domed tower of the stately Moorish mission building glistened in morning sunlight, its ornate cross atop it silver and gray in contrast to the stonewashed white of the dome beneath it.

To the immediate left of the building a healthy garden of roses and sunflowers corralled a sloping grass expanse populated by one marble bench shaded by a lone palm tree.

He strode toward it, felt the heat of the day on the adobe arm of the bench, brushed away fallen leaves from the seat, and deposited himself there.

Perched as it was above a busy freeway, it was understood that in this area of the park one would amid the otherwise bucolic atmosphere be subject to the whoosh of freeway traffic.

Not today. It was as if, he pondered alone on the bench, no freeway had ever existed. He was taken back in time –a saner place to be.

This was an understatement, that in the course of 24, 36 hours the world had changed.

Anyway, it was here, on this bench, that he'd kept his first "date" with Tarah. What was it? Twelve years ago now? They'd sat together in silence for a few moments, understandably nervous given the circumstances of her being still legally married and his feeling guilty about it. Freeway noise. Bird song. Their mutual breathing.

Today, just the bird song.

Everyone was being reflective now because of what was happening. He had a right to do the same. To just sit, and think, and remember, and cherish or regret. It was good to not hear the whooshing automobiles. It was good to remember.

His car was a sanctuary, and germ free. It was like you could take your house or apartment, put it on wheels, roll up the windows and go virtually wherever you wanted to go and you were immune from the threat. Why didn't more people, just to get the hell out of their indoor asylums, climb into their cars and drive?

The answer was, most of them believed there was nowhere to drive to. But that was missing the liberating point of it all. You didn't have to have a specific destination, somewhere that you got out of your car, walked into something and did something else. Driving, in other words, for driving's sake.

Eventually, yes, you'd have to gas up or, with an electric vehicle, power up. But no one, not even avid drivers like himself, was driving as much as before the threat, so you didn't have to worry too much about gas or battery power.

Some days he drove no more than 15 minutes or so – out of town, past the airport, over to a manmade island landscaped with palm trees. For added inducement there was a CD/MP3 player for musical accompaniment. Further added inducement, almost no other cars to navigate around or watch out for. He had the road practically to himself.

On occasions where he felt more restless but more ambitious too, he'd indulge in a long drive, with Roxie in the back seat – up the coast to the next big city, or to the mountains or desert. That might necessitate gassing up, but he'd be prepared with his surgical gloves and sanitary wipes. Then it was off he'd go.

As the months began to pile up, the driving became less for its own sake and more with a destination in mind. But Sean chose wisely. If he was

to be in enforced isolation outside of his car, he would only venture into further isolation.

This inspired the road trip to Zzyzx.

The drive, nearly four hours up Interstate 15, would go faster with so few cars on the road. Sean brought Roxie along for company. She enjoyed sticking her head out the partially rolled down window and the warmish breeze against her nose and ears.

Anyone who'd ever driven from Southern California to Las Vegas – and that would mean thousands upon thousands – had seen and been curious about the Zzyzx Road offramp located on a desolate stretch of the highway about 100 miles or so from Sin City. Why the name? What was at the end of the road? Why didn't cars ever seem to get off there?

With time to read – who didn't have that? – he'd done some research before setting out that April morning. A radio preacher in the '40s who'd opened a mineral spa in the ironically godforsaken area wanted its name to be at the end of an alphabetical directory. So whom did he expect would ever come there?

The mineral spa, Sean read, didn't last, and there was supposedly something called the Desert Studies Center at the end of Zzyzx Road. What the hell was that? Who worked there? Who went there? Was there anything else at the end of the road?

Sean recognized that the viral pandemic was killing people but for others it afforded them the gift of time. He had that gift as long as he was careful. He had time, away from his work at the shuttered theater company, to do some things he'd never have done – like drive to Zzyzx.

Wikipedia had listed the population of the unincorporated area known as Zzyzx as 1. Aha! There, Sean thought, as he spotted the Zzyzx Road offramp a few hundred feet ahead, was someone presumably safe from COVID-19. All alone in a nearly deserted "town."

Roxie had curled up in the back seat of the car by this time and was snoring, which Sean realized only when he turned off the music he'd been playing since leaving home. The arrival in Zzyzx would give both of them an opportunity to stretch their legs – his two and the dog's four – after the long morning drive up and into the desert.

Though this was the highway to Vegas, it'd been sparsely populated by other drivers on the way north – mostly trucks that were going about their business, pandemic be damned. He'd driven by and around enough of them at this point to begin recognizing the same defiant, determined mugs beneath ballcaps and doo rags. The longer he drove the more the truckers began to conjure images of the "Mad Max" roadsters – that was proof enough that it was time to get out of the car and inhale some fresh air.

Sean had stopped reading or listening to the news a couple of weeks into the state shutdown, but he couldn't escape the anecdotal reporting that restless citizens throughout were already clamoring for California to "reopen." He subsequently began ignoring emails and texts from anyone besides the closest members of his family – too much anger and bombast and craziness, even among his circle of acquaintances. You'd have thought those working in theater as he did would be more sensitive to the welfare of humanity in general, but this had proven to be not always the case.

Money. That was it.

He arrived at the Zzyzx cutoff, eased the car away from the interstate and began to drive the supposed four and a half miles of gravelly paved road toward whatever awaited at its terminus.

This was dry-lake, dusty, blinding-sun desert with tumbleweeds and only the heartiest plants hugging or occupying the road ahead.

What if there were no one waiting for him? He, Sean Mason Lawrence, could be the population 1 of Zzyzx. Two if Roxie was counted. Was this too desolate and forlorn a destination to wait out the pandemic?

They said It

"Solitude is independence." – Hermann Hesse

"The strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone." -- Ibsen

"It is very easy to love alone." – Gertrude Stein

"The doer alone learneth" -- Nietzsche

"The strong man is strongest when alone." – Friedrich Schiller

A sign about a mile down the lonely road read, barely through the coating of dust and erosion: "LAKE MOJAVE DESERT."

Sean rolled his window all the way down. Warm, dry air poured in. The dog emerged from the back seat, hopped into the front and nuzzled the passenger-side window glass. Sean rolled that window down too.

Another sign, a few hundred yards further informed arrivals that the "CSU Desert Studies Center" was 2.5 miles ahead. In lettering that Sean could barely make out until he slowed down almost to a stop it read: "SODA SPRINGS HISTORIC DISTRICT."

All of this suggested to him that there might be more than one person in Zzyzx when he arrived.

Since he'd stopped to read the sign, he shifted the car into neutral and read the information about the DSC on the face of his phone: "Only the Lake Tuendae interpretive trail, operated by the Mojave National Preserve, is open to the public."

So there was a trail.

He patted the dog's flank. "Ready for a walk?"

Ten minutes later, Sean Lawrence stood among the remains – or ruins – of what had been the Zzyzx Mineral Spa: an empty decaying pool shaped like a cross; crumbling coffin-like individual spas in the shade of a dilapidated clubhouse building; weeds and mongrel grasses growing over anything and

everything. All in an unrelenting sun and a temperature above 90, so read his Apple watch.

Sound? The wind. Nothing else.

Roxie, off leash and on guard, scurried from area to area sniffing and occasionally growling. Sean wondered whimsically if there were ghosts in these midsts: the spirit of the preacher/snake-oil salesman who'd founded this place and hawked the restorative powers of his mineral spas? The parched miners who'd worked this land at one time, probably in vain? The native Americans long before them who would have shuddered at a name like Zzyzx?

Only at the thriving blue Lake Tuendae, surrounded by majestic palm trees situated as if they'd been placed there by God himself, and in which a few quacking and splashing ducks resided, did Zzyzx exhibit any sign of life. With the dog at his heels, Sean walked along and around this oasis, dabbing at his perspiring brow and neck with a handkerchief, removing and re-donning and then removing again his aviator sunglasses as the intensity of the light seemed to shift from spot to spot.

There was no one else around here. No one at the relics of the spa. At the Desert Studies Center, he'd found doors locked and window shades drawn and only one other car parked there – a dusty Jeep with one of its tires missing. The uneven rear of the vehicle was propped up on a block of granite.

Sean made a seat for himself on what remained of a felled tree. He wondered if this place was *always* this deserted, or was it like this because of the state mandate? But then who would come here anyway?

He would. From childhood on, Sean had appreciated and enjoyed the starkness and remote beauty of the desert in a way that no one else in his family had, nor few if any of his friends. This may not have been the best place to be, but it was far from the worst place to be.

Here, in tiny forgotten Zzyzx, California, he was isolated. And that was all right.

The home camera, its lens pointed at him, rolled. The microphone built into the computer activated. RECORDING.

"Hello everybody who's watching this," Sean said, making himself comfortable in the chair at his home workspace. "In case you're all wondering how I'm doing, the answer is fine."

He gestured toward Roxie, asleep in a chair behind him. "Of course I've got this gal for company. She doesn't know what's going on in the world and I guess you could say she's better off that way. On the other hand, I do know, but I'm managing it. What choice do we all have? Look out for ourselves, look out for each other. Believe that this too shall pass."

Walking Roxie in the shell of the downtown area, Sean noted the peculiar but understandable practice that pedestrians, what few there were, had of purposely crossing to the other side of the street rather than meeting along the same sidewalk. Some wore surgical masks, others of the homemade variety or scarves wrapped tight around their face from the nose down.

A nurse whom he knew by sight if not by name often crossed his path in the mornings, and in her heavy protective clothing and headgear, she resembled nothing less than a deep-sea diver. He knew from mutual acquaintance that she had a husband and a child at home and that it took her nearly an hour each evening when she returned from work at a hospital to rid herself of any possible contagion accrued on the job.

This was living.

The bygone convention center building not far from his loft had been converted to a warehouse before the month of March. Now it was a temporary home for the homeless, the mayor having decreed that potentially infected or contagious people living on the street be given access to the building, where in addition to toilet facilities and food donated by a rescue mission they also receive protective masks. Whether they chose to wear them was up to them, and no, this would not be a permanent situation. In July, the warehouse

was scheduled to be turned over to a contractor for leveling – the start of a redevelopment project.

In passing the warehouse with the dog one afternoon, he heard blaring from inside a recording of Stevie Wonder's "Smile Please." The lyrics lightened his heart and, he hoped, did the same for others who might hear it:

"Love within and you'll begin smiling

"There are brighter days ahead."

He had this dream and when he awoke he lay there in the darkness and thought about it for some time. A world away had passed and the streets once again were filled with raised voices and revving engines, with exhortations and laughter.

Faces sheathed in cloth and fabric, hidden souls of hidden personality, were again bared, and touch – human touch – which had been degraded to anathema, to poison, was once more welcome and precious.

The shroud that covered a planet had shriveled up, elevated and floated away into the vast sea of nothingness on the other side of the universe.

He felt the weight of the dog pressed against his midsection and then Roxie's wet, scratchy tongue painting the side of his face. The first glimmers of dawn penetrated the cracked blinds over the bedroom window.

"Someday, dream come true," he said aloud.

On Never Dying

"Now is eternity. Now is the immortal life." – Richard Jeffries

"All men's souls are immortal, but the souls of the righteous are immortal and divine." -- Socrates

"Why was I born if it wasn't forever?" – Ionesco

"This life is one link in that golden chain of immortality." – M.D. Chatterton

"If any creature stands a chance of defeating death it is man." – Tom Robbins

Alexis saw the man who'd introduced himself as Sean again, not long after that initial meeting, on a quite cold morning. His dog, on a short leash, sat and surveyed the silent, empty park with vigilance, its tail behind it very still.

Sean looked up as her high-tops squeaked on the pavement. His eyes, friendly above the rest of the face concealed by cloth, darted from her to the dog, then back to her again.

"We've got familiar company, Rox," she heard him say.

"Good morning," she offered and she really wanted to remove her mask. They were outside after all.

"Alex," he said, and he stood up.

"That's right. How've you been?"

"Been on adventures," he said with a casual shrug of the shoulders.

She gave this some thought then said: "So have I. But I haven't been anywhere."

They both startled when a truck nearby blasted its horn.

"I'm sorry," Alexis chuckled, patting her breast. "I'm a little jumpy."

The dog rose, moved to her and licked her hand.

"Roxie is telling you everything is chill," Sean said. He slid to one side of the bench. "Would you like to sit down, Alex?"

"I don't know …"

"Sean," he finished for her. "That's all right. But if you're standing, I feel like I should stand too." He tugged at the dog's leash. "Better yet, why don't we take a walk?"

They paraded, the three of them, around the perimeters of the park, almost in single file: dog ahead, then Sean holding his leash, and Alexis directly behind them. After one circumnavigation of the park, stopping only to let the dog water a plant or flower bed and making small talk of the variety that was pro forma since mid-March, they stopped together by the bench where they'd started.

"What do you say, Alex?" Sean posed first. "Care to venture down the street and maybe over to the bayfront?"

She'd made such a walk part of her daily routine by this time, but had done so always alone.

"I'd like that, Sean," she said.

There were sailboats on the bay, three of them visible from the dock where they stopped. You could even hear someone aboard the lead boat calling out to someone aboard the one behind them; then there was laughter.

"That's the first time I've seen this," Alexis confided to her neighbor. "Pleasure boating, right?"

"You said it, Alex." Sean pointed across the bay to the inlet on the other side – little red roofs and glass windows even from a distance reflecting sunlight. "When the ferry starts up again," he said, "I'm going to take my bicycle over there. It's a nice ride."

"Sounds," she replied, "very normal."

"It is," he looked at her.

She exhaled. "I'm sorry. I've been cooped up for weeks now and I'm still getting used to being out and about again. Without worrying that I'm doing so."

"I understand. But there are lots of places to go." He gave the dog a little more slack on the leash. "'Ever been to Zzyzx, for example?"

"Zzyzx? Is that something made up?"

She heard his muffled laugh beneath the cloth mask. "It's real enough. One of my 'adventures.'"

Alexis was relieved. "I see."

"It helps to get away," Sean said, looking out again at the little red roofs across the bay. "Just to get away anywhere."

"I'll get there," she said.

He turned to her and his eyes danced a bit. "To Zzyzx?"

"Anywhere." She cocked an eyebrow. "Baby steps."

"As long as you get there."

They started on their way again, the two of them and the dog, away from the bayfront, across the traffic-less boulevard, over the rotting, unused railroad tracks and toward the park that awaited them again.

Alexis stumbled over a crack in a sidewalk that had been ignored for some time. Sean caught her by the elbow.

"Baby steps," he joked.

It felt very odd to have someone touch her, even by the elbow. She resisted an impulse to yank herself free, but she was grateful for the assistance. "Thanks," she said instead.

"No worries."

"No worries," she echoed, and as he looked at her, she reached behind her head and with one hand loosened the mask over her face and pulled it gently away. "We're outside," she said.

Sean didn't have to be goaded into doing the same.

For more than a few moments they stood and took in, absorbed and appreciated each other's unmasked faces.

They remained if not the six mandated feet apart, three and a half or four. It was close enough to see each other's breath without breathing each other's air, safe enough to feel wholly alive in the same half-world.

"This is nice," Alexis couldn't help but say.

He nodded. "Preview of coming attractions."

She re-tied her mask after saying goodbye. Her walk away from the park, toward the entrance to her building found her counting the steps one by one. When she reached the iron-grill door that led to the garage, she stopped and turned around. Her neighbor and his dog had gone.

Fitfully that night, she tried to sleep. It had been a mistake to look at her phone and at CNN.com before retiring. Between June 18 and 25, more than 230,000 new cases in the U.S. The death toll had risen to 124,000.

"Numbers, numbers, numbers" unsettled her mind as she turned from one side to the other in a bed that this night felt like a slab of concrete. "Have to think of something else. Think of music. Think of Rags." But she felt a different kind of pain, the loneliness of loss, and this became a profound awareness of all the thousands who were experiencing that same pain.

Alexis debated surrendering, getting up and reading or occupying the armchair in the living room for a while, just closing her eyes. The very back and forth in her head, however, began to weary her and to settle her.

She drifted off, and somewhere between midnight and the wee hours of a new day, she dreamed the flying dream.

With little sense of her earthly body and with absolutely no fear, she spread her arms wide like wings and soared, liberated, over the world below. Over the vacant rooftops and darkened-windowed skyscrapers. Above empty streets intersected by stoplights blinking red and blinking red and blinking red. Weightless and acrobatic overlooking the deep blue waters of the bay and beyond, the ocean.

Giddy and invigorated now, she swooped low, over the park adjacent to her building and though it was lit only by two orange-glowing Victorian lamps, it held life. There were people.

There was Sean, on that bench, with Roxie seated beside him. There were children bundled in puffy coats playing ring-around-the-lamppost. Their laughter could be heard from on high. There were two lovers on one

of the other benches, their faces hidden as they caressed tightly. There was a woman alone, someone like Alexis Trask, walking the perimeter, her hands sunk into the pockets of her overcoat, her hair secured in a scarf. She walked, confidently, shoulders and head high, like someone who knew where she was headed.

And then in flight she swooped upward, gaining altitude, momentarily upside down then righted just beneath a silver-blue cloud. Above her, a sea of stars.

She flew onward into the night, chasing sleep and chasing stars.

Everything Is Broken

She'd been dogged by an uneasy feeling – more than that, a palpable sense of dread – on her 20-minute drive from her West Town condominium to her sister's East Town apartment building. Calls to Jenna's number had gone straight to voicemail. Texts had gone unanswered. The last she'd heard from her middle sister, nearly a week ago, Jenna had ranted in a helter-skelter email transmitted after 1 in the morning that the cops were "out to get" her, that they'd pulled her over for no damned reason, that she'd been straight when they did, and that she "ought to sue" somebody.

For a hot minute Sunny had considered enlisting the cops to do a welfare check on Jenna, thereby absolving herself of in-person responsibility. It would be the fourth time she'd done this. But remembering that last email appealed to her better judgment: How would Jenna, in any condition, react to the police entering her home – AGAIN! -- without being invited?

Now it had reached the point where she was grateful for red traffic lights on the way, anything to delay this trip she hadn't wanted to make.

Theresa "Sunny" Fredette was the first born of the three daughters brought into the world by Helena Lynn Massingale, who, she later found out, went into labor and delivered while perpetually randy spouse Jack Fredette was somewhere across town philandering with his latest inamorata. Sunny had

entered the world, as Helena would tell her as soon as she was old enough to understand, with what the doctor swore was a tiny smile on her tiny face.

Then she'd been slapped into reality and into erupting tears as medical procedure and the world demanded.

In any rate, the smile had accounted for the nickname given to her by her mother. It was considered by prying family relations unconventional or inappropriate for a christening, but Helena, ever-stubborn, hadn't cared. *"She was such a smiley baby!"* She'd had a close childhood friend growing up called Sunny whom she'd loved, and she promised – again as soon as her first-born was old enough to understand – that she would love Sunny forever. So it read "THERESA" on the birth certificate, but no one would ever call her that.

Sunny's father, who when close to hearth and home pampered his daughter in the only way he knew how to – hoisting her up on his shoulders and parading her around the house – always called her "Sunday." *"It's happy Saturday, Sunday!" "Sunday is our fun day!"*

Upon discovering backyard photography when his first child was nearly 2, Jack declared her his favorite subject. He'd pose her outside in front of the red and orange roses or purple dahlias, taking pictures, until she squirmed her way out of modeling and back to something where she could move. Even that young, she couldn't abide staying still.

A few months before Jenna was born, a very pregnant Helena began reading to Sunny at bedtime, confident that she was old enough to understand words. Not "Good Night Moon" or "Go Dog Go." She read from "The Wind In the Willows":

"All this he saw, for one moment breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered."

She'd liked listening to her mother read, in only the night table lamp light, cozy under her blankets and feeling warm. Hearing more the music of the words read by Helena than knowing what they meant or how they connected. Sometimes she struggled to understand, not being a

grown-up, but before long, she'd be asleep. If she were lucky, she'd dream the words-come-real.

The security-guard booth at the entrance to her sister's gated East Town community was, as usual, unmanned. The wooden mechanical arm designed to impede intruders until they were sanctioned by said guard was, also as usual, upright, permitting anyone and everyone unchecked access. For this shoddy security, either their parents or Jenna's ex-husband Barry– Sunny wasn't certain which – paid an over-exorbitant monthly rent.

She recognized from the last time she'd visited, to meet cops who'd been summoned to do the previous welfare check, the same pale, lanky teen-age boys with their turned-around ballcaps and painted skateboards. Again they were skidding and screeching and jumping on and off their boards just around the sharp corner from the block where Jenna resided. They paid her no attention as she weaved slowly around them.

The last time she'd pulled up in front of Jenna's house there'd been a black-and-white patrol car there and one of the two uniformed officers who'd responded to her call was waiting for her, arms crossed over his broad chest. "Altered," he'd told her without emotion after she'd emerged from her own car. Police code for dead-drunk.

But for a squirrel munching on an acorn in the middle of the driveway, all was quiet this time.

Sunny pulled to the curb, parked, shut off the engine and breathed over her steering wheel.

When Jenna was born, she became the focus and at the outset the light of Helena's life. A more frail and more fretful infant than her older sister, Jenna naturally developed a temperamental, clinging attachment to her mother. Sunny was too young to recognize or comprehend a co-dependency. It was

a relationship, Jenna and Helena's, that would endure as the years went on – the two of them each other's best friend and best foil.

With her mother preoccupied with Jenna – and vice versa – a 2-year-old Sunny sought solace and comfort and company in her father. She began to recognize the sound of his car – and of the electric garage door swinging open – when he returned home from work in the evening. Usually it was she, and not her mother, who was first to greet him. She'd toddle across the hardwood floor in the dining room that separated the garage door entrance from the kitchen and wait for him to scoop her up into his arms. Sometimes he did … most times he didn't. But when he did, "Sunday" was in heaven.

Sunny raised her forehead from the steering wheel where it had rested and opened her eyes. She'd been back in the "twos." Sitting at her father's arm in his leather chair, her face resting against his chest and feeling the coarse fabric of one of his polo shirts and smelling something strong and acidic coming from his face and neck. She didn't realize it was vodka. Not then.

As she hesitantly opened the car door and stepped out into the humid late afternoon, she smelled again, on the heavy, slow breeze, the bitter stench of booze.

She closed the car door with more authority, and some level of disdain, realizing she wasn't smelling anything at all. The day was without scent and without the lamentable vestiges of the past. Just the present, the one she moved steadily but reluctantly through on the narrow walkway toward her sister's front door.

She found the door locked, but she had a key. Sunny had let herself in before and she could do so anytime she pleased. The welfare checks she'd ordered? Not because she couldn't let herself in but because she didn't want to. She didn't want to now, and it again would be safer, less painful to let the cops do for her what she recoiled at doing herself, but this time, THIS TIME she would go ahead.

It all went back to that uneasy feeling.

The lock clicked open and in Sunny went.

She was immediately aware of the whir of a fan circulating air in the very middle of the dimly lit living room, its real purpose to mask the odor of something no doubt. Jenna's front room was its usual mess of unopened mail, half-eaten takeout and strewn wrinkled clothing. The faded orange couch bulged with misshapen pillows. The blinds drawn over the one large window were dusty and bunched up like an accordion laid on its side. The coffee table held two ashtrays overflowing with stinking butts.

"Jenna?" Sunny called in the direction of the narrow corridor that separated the living room from the back of the apartment, where the one bedroom and bathroom were situated. She stepped over an upside-down plastic stool, usually found in the kitchen but now nearly in the middle of the hallway. She flicked on an overhead light.

"Hey Jenna!"

Sunny startled when her cellphone tinkled inside her purse, the sign that someone had texted her. She stopped and unearthed the phone from her bag: "YOUR VERIZON BILL OF $88.97 IS NOW DUE ..."

"Fuck that." She let the phone fall back into the depths of her purse.

The apartment had been so damned stone-cold silent that no wonder the texting sound had alarmed her. Maybe Jenna wasn't home. She hadn't checked the garage, though her sister usually parked in the driveway.

"Jenna?"

She found her in the bedroom, slung over her floor mattress, on her back, her one arm hanging over the side, the other across her bare midriff. Her dry crown of hair, recently dyed some mixture of brown and purple, spread behind her head looking like a pillow that had exploded. Her eyes were closed, her lips barely parted and wet with saliva.

Jenna dropped to one knee and in so doing crunched a prescription bottle, causing its plastic cap to spurt free. She clasped her sister's forearm, then the side of her neck.

They were ice-cold.

She stood in the first row of pews at St. Mark's Church, flanked on one side by her mother, who was bent and slightly shaking, and her youngest (now her only) sister April, stiff and staring straight ahead and chewing gum as she always did to keep from smoking. Behind her, in the second pew, she could hear the heavy breathing of her father and his intermittent clearing of his phlegmy throat, and smell the sugary-sweet scent of his second wife's cologne mingling with the incense in the cloistered air. Jenna's ex Barry and his new wife, whomever, stood further back in another pew, both of them looking impassive and in the case of wife whomever, bored.

The pink-cheeked priest in dark vestments, posing in the sacristy with his hands in supplicant's mien, was singing, scarcely with melody or even trace of melody, "Amazing Grace."

His congregation more whispered along with him than sang. Even this was vaguely off key.

In her one black dress and one pair of shoes that had heels, Sunny inhaled, exhaled, inhaled, exhaled, whispered the words with the rest of them, with no melody at all …

"I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see."

She'd decided not to sing and had long ago forgotten how to pray.

Madison Mooney, PhD, chair-facing-chair from her client and separated from her by just a few feet of dated shag carpet, looked up from a scribbled-upon legal pad. "That wish list you completed, Sunny? As homework?"

Sunny had hated that her shrink called it "homework." There was irritation in her reply of "What about it?"

Dr. Mooney's brow elevated. "Well … you only wrote one thing here." She passed the loose piece of paper that had been atop her legal pad to her client.

Sunny read the words she'd written so succinctly and instinctively there: UNFUCK MY CHILDHOOD.

"Yeah? What about it?"

Dr. Mooney crossed her legs. "Well … I can guess what you meant by that, but I was hoping for something more … expansive. After all, there were two whole pages here you could have written on."

"That's really all I had to say. You know, to put on my wish list." Reluctant to make eye contact with the doctor, her eyes strayed over Mooney's shoulder to the woman's framed diploma hanging on the wall above her oak desk. Ironic wasn't it? She was Sunny. Doc was Mooney. Ironic or just plain bizarro?

It was always push/pull between them. Some therapy.

Dr. Mooney, on the upper side of 40 and knowledgeable though she was about the human psyche, bound and determined to LOOK on the lower side of 35, tossed her crimped chestnut hair over her shoulder. "I thought," she said, clearing her throat with emphasis, "you'd decided that no matter what, you weren't going to keep assigning blame to your parents for where you are now."

Sunny didn't hesitate. "Where I AM now is with you, Mooney. You're supposed to be on my side."

The doctor had many sessions ago reluctantly accepted her client's insistence on calling her by her last name. Just one quirk among many Ms. Fredette had brought to her roster of patients. It was either an act of passive aggression or a way of dismissing the import of the therapy, but whatever … she was being paid handsomely to tolerate the disrespect. If she helped her client somehow while doing so all the better.

"My mother said something to me yesterday," Sunny said, and she lowered her head, her dishwater-blonde hair tumbling over her face in the process. "She said 'I'm worried about your sister's drinking.' What the hell do you think of that? SHE'S worried about Jenna's drinking."

Dr. Mooney set her legal pad on the desk beside her. "Is there something wrong with that?"

Sunny looked up and her stiff hair fell back against her shoulders again. "My mother's a drunk!"

"And ..."

"She's calling out her daughter for drinking too much. That doesn't strike you as hypocritical, Mooney? I mean, sure, we all know that Jenna has wine bottles stacked up in the closet of her apartment. Like mother like daughter, man."

The doctor decided not to say anything for the moment.

Sunny came to her feet and was harboring fresh indignation. "You should have been there the day we moved out of the Ibsen Street house. Back in Loma. I was like, 15, 16? I don't know." She detoured to the one window in the office and tried to peer through the frosty glass. "The movers showed up early, like they were supposed to, but Jenna and Ape and I were in our PJs and we had to scramble out of bed, throw something over ourselves.

"'Is somebody sitting on the toilet?' this mover asked me when I came downstairs. Shit, my mother was in there, crashed out. On the can. Jen and I had to go in there and pull her out, in front of all these leering assholes in coveralls. And they had dirty hands, I remember. Like they'd been ... I don't know what." She spun around. "I know. Like they were plumbers, not movers."

She regarded the shrink, still in her leather swivel chair. "I thought for some reason they were going to steal from us. Because my mother was so out of it and not aware of what was going on. So I followed this one guy as he went to the downstairs closets to collect our stuff, and when he opened the doors there were empty booze bottles in all of them. They stank, too."

"I'm sorry," said the doctor.

"Remind me," said Sunny, and her voice croaked, "to tell you about Birthday No. 16. That was a real winner, believe you me." She retreated to the chair she'd occupied when the session began, dropped into it with a thud,

swatted at the hair now in her face again and clammed up for the rest of the hour.

She was the first one to break free into the welcome daylight outside the church, and with her gloved right hand she pulled the buzzing cellphone from her black clutch and said "Hello" without checking the number on the screen first.

"It's me."

Ned always said "It's me" matter-of-factly, like there'd be no doubt in the world who "me" was when he called.

"What do you want, 'Me'?"

"What do you mean 'what do I want,' Sunny?"

Sunny moved to a row of parked cars, away from the retreating, muttering throng that was emerging from the side door of the church. She pressed the phone close to her left ear. "In case you've forgotten," she said, "I'm at Jenna's funeral."

"I hadn't forgotten," he said on the other end. "I just wanted to see how you were doing."

"Peachy."

"Come on, Sunny. Don't be like that."

"Ned, I'd like to talk to you, but now really isn't the time. I just came out of the service. There are people waiting for me."

He apologized for the timing and shortly hung up with a punchless "Call me, babe" entreaty.

She hated when he called her "babe." Babe was still better than baby. The last man who'd called her baby became the recipient of an f-bomb.

Sunny slipped the phone back into her clutch. Sunlight in her eyes, she squinted into it and remembered the first thing Ned had casually asked her on their very first date, there in some noisy hipster cafe: "So, what's your dysfunction?" as if asking her what her astrological sign was.

How was that for an opening line?

The house that Jack (Fredette) built on a wide tree-lined street in the Willows neighborhood – so named for the majestic trees that lined the street – was of faded but sturdy, weather-resistant red brick, a two-story Georgian with large symmetrical windows on the first floor, four smaller windows on the second, and two cupola windows protruding from either side of the gabled roof. All looked out on a leafy parkette across the street that was inhabited by two wooden benches, a stone fountain that sometimes worked and when it did gurgled erratically, and a leaning gazebo painted pale green and in sore need of repair.

Sunny's father had moved out of the house and across town more than 20 years ago and only set foot inside the place he'd built during the irregular holiday gatherings his ex-wife held there. That probably added up to seven or eight times in the more than two decades that had passed.

In that time, Helena had resided in and presided over the house, raising by herself three daughters while, once the youngest of them hit teen age, nightly drinking herself into a stupor.

When Sunny arrived, the house was already swollen with funeral attendees. Most were nearby neighbors of her mother's, graying couples or widowed women who'd heard about the tragedy through the gossip grapevine and felt compelled to "be there" for Helena Fredette, who when sober was quite affable and even social among them. She was not, Sunny knew, a holed-up, round-the-clock drunk like Jenna had become. Just a regular drinker who disappeared after about 4 in the afternoon, not to be seen by anyone until the next day.

A few of these sympathizers Sunny knew by face if not more intimately than that. The Feyerbands, who lived directly next door, were both retired and frequently traveled, though they'd been known to engage in long, front-yard conversations with Helena on those occasions when they were actually at home. Doll Feyerband was a genuinely kind woman, a tried-and-true

Minnesotan who said things like "you betcha" and "darn tootin'"; her husband Tom was a more stoic sort but long-winded when it came to recounting one of his and his wife's RV travel adventures.

A Mrs. Gibson from the house next door on the other side was a nervous but pleasant woman three years widowed and someone who, Sunny had been told by Helena, once in a while stopped in for coffee or afternoon tea. She always brought with her Abby, her faithful labradoodle companion. No Abby at the house this morning, Sunny noted, seeing Mrs. Gibson in muted conversation with her mother by the draped table that had been set up with a coffee percolator, cups, saucers and cookies. In eyeing them, it occurred to her that she, her mother and April, who was standing frozenly with two people she didn't know across the room, were the only ones dressed wholly in black. The rest, in what could be considered churchgoing clothes, wore the black armbands that the minister had handed out in front of the church.

"Boy-O" Littlefield as he was called, though he had thinning gray hair, and wife Grayson, the unofficial neighborhood watchdogs, were welcoming arrivals at the open front door, taking charge as was their habit. It was Grayson, a taut, dignified woman with silvering blonde hair, who usually phoned Sunny with honest concern when Helena hadn't answered the phone or appeared for several days.

"I thought you'd want to know, Sunny," she'd always say, though to her credit either she or her husband would volunteer to go over and check in on her behalf.

It was like having another set of welfare-check cops.

Her stylishly gray Aunt Pris (Priscilla) was there, but otherwise no other family members. It was a consequence of being born to parents who had one sibling between them and two sets of grandparents, all of them only children. Jack and Helena must have been regarded as prolific for producing three daughters.

Neither Barry the ex nor his second wife had come to the house.

Standing in the middle of the room, a polarized statue in black, Sunny numbly looked over the guests and felt from behind periodic squeezes of her shoulders or presses of her right hand. Whispered condolences were directed through her falling strands of hair into one ear or the other.

She deflected all. Wondered if Helena, who had vanished into the kitchen with a few other people, was sticking to percolated coffee. Probably. She couldn't, she *wouldn't* be drinking this early in the day, and not on this day of all days. But Sunny knew she would have to find out, and very soon. With her mother not in the living room, she, the eldest child, was representing the family. She was the designated recipient of the commiserations and the portal of grief.

For an instant, she and her sister April made eye contact across the room. April was petite and dark haired, the physical opposite of her taller, blonde older sister. She'd always been the most serious and purposely unemotional of the Fredette siblings, and that perceived joyless demeanor had misled outsiders to assume that she was the oldest, not the youngest, of the three.

In watching April stoically accepting what apparently were consoling words from the Feyerbands, Sunny couldn't help but flash on what Jenna had told her, in a sober moment, only about a month earlier:

"I'm worried," she'd confided, "that April is drinking too much."

They'd had words at the house earlier before carpooling to the church. As always with April, the passive-aggressiveness was delivered in a moderate tone - Sunny had never heard her sister raise her voice. But she could sting with a shoulder shrug, an eye roll, a head shaken in derision.

"Mother asked for you when I walked in this morning," she'd said. "You know, her princess."

"Jesus, April."

"Or the little princess, like Dad says."

"Will you just stop it? Now's not the time."

April had shrugged a shoulder, rolled her eyes and shaken her head. All right, she was hurting. They all were, but Sunny wondered why this had to go down now.

"Never mind," April had dismissed.

Sunny flinched now as she felt a bony hand clutch her shoulder.

Her mother, looking clear-eyed but anxious, spoke sotto voce and with obvious irritation: "Where the hell is your father? Hmm? Have you heard from him? Has he called you?"

"No. But he'll be here."

"How do you know? He's your father."

Sunny had little knowledge of old movies and not much interest in them either, but from girlhood she'd been told by her Aunt Pris and by some of Helena's friends that her mother in younger years looked like the actress Loretta Young. Sunny'd had to Google her to see who they were talking about and in so doing discovered a green-eyed beauty, at once sophisticated and wholesome looking, possessing the glamour and blush of classic filmdom. Now she looked at Helena, her once-taut skin aged by drinking, her hair dry and lusterless, and saw nothing of the movie star there. Old photos remained, and they validated what once existed and drew Jack Fredette to her. Who knew where those old photos were now?

"Mother, he was at the funeral," Sunny finally responded to Helena's "where is he?" question. She tried to whisper and be heard above all the conversations in the room. "He can't be far away."

Her mother shrugged with clear contempt. "Unless he stopped off for a drink."

As Helena stalked off in the direction of the kitchen, Sunny gave this a moment's consideration. It wasn't without possibility. Her father had maintained a stony expression during the service, one matched by his impassive wife Maeve. If he'd had to let go emotionally, what was his usual vessel for doing so?

A drink.

There had to be profound complexities in his reactions and his coping mechanisms. A lifelong womanizer who loved women, at least in that fashion, Jack Fredette had had no idea how to raise a daughter or love a daughter, and fate had damned him with three of them. She, Sunny, was probably the closest to him, and yet her own adulthood had made him more distant, not less. If they related on any level beyond strictly familial, she couldn't see one.

But yes, he should have been there by now.

Father Andrew Hanley, the fresh-faced priest who'd presided at the funeral, arrived and finger-waved at Sunny from the foyer. He'd tried his best to be solemn and consoling at the service, but it was much more in his nature to be upbeat and ebullient – while observing the constraints of the circumstances. At one point, Sunny remembered, he'd tried to enlist the mourners in a chanting gesture to make the point that Jenna hadn't died, she'd gone to God, and that was a positive thing.

"Higher higher higher," he'd intoned almost joyfully, then "lower lower lower" in a soft dismissive voice, explaining that this group engagement would help everyone see this tragic day in a hopeful light.

It hadn't worked. Sunny kept equating "higher higher higher" with heaven and "lower lower lower" with hell. She hoped no one else in the church had done the same.

"So let me make sure I understand," Dr. Mooney'd said. "You sleep in a weighted blanket."

"That's right."

"Not for warmth, though? For anxiety?"

Sunny had stiffened. "Is there something wrong with that?"

"Not at all. Whatever makes you feel more … secure."

"You mean like a security blanket."

"I suppose."

"I don't think you're taking this seriously, Mooney. I don't think you're taking me seriously."

"Sunny … you're wrong."

The truth of it was, the weighted blanket had become her best, most benign antidote for depression.

For everyone around her, everyone in her fucking life, the antidote was booze.

Ned's gay sister Reba had been the one who'd told her about the blankets and what they could do for someone who was "perpetually sad."

"But I'm not perpetually sad," Sunny had protested.

Still, she found herself buying one from Amazon and, after it arrived one morning, throwing it on her bed and sleeping with it wrapped around her every night since. Shit. She needed to clean it.

Jack Fredette showed up at the house just as Jenna's friend from the stable where she had a horse (that she never rode) was mustering the courage to address the mourners. Rather than being embarrassed or annoyed by the interruption, the uber-tanned young woman named Goldie appeared relieved, stepping aside to let her friend's father and his clearly uncomfortable spouse take center stage.

The first to acknowledge his presence, and that of Maeve Fredette, was Helena, and her sardonic greeting from the kitchen doorway was tinged with the effects of her first drink of the day.

Sunny proceeded to her father's side before any public confrontation could occur. Sunday, always the peacemaker. The oldest. The Libra. The avoidant one.

"What took you so long, Dad?" she spoke firmly into his ear. "That's why Mom's upset."

She felt a tug on her elbow from Maeve. "Why don't you give your father a break, Sunny?" she said, sharply. "OK?"

"Stop it, Maeve," Fredette said to her.

Sunny stood between the two of them. "Can we just remember that today is about Jenna? I mean, really?"

She was grateful when Father Andrew made an announcement that "it was so good!" of them all to be there, that this was what Jenna wanted. Sunny thought this a presumptuous, dubious statement, but it had the effect of keeping potential adversaries apart, and the tension in the room abated as such. But this catharsis, in her mind, was short-lived.

"Higher higher higher!" Then "Lower lower lower!"

Sunny cowered. She slipped outside and for the first time in five years threw up. Sorry, rosebushes.

It was, she considered, a genuine case of "physician, heal thyself." For two and a half years she'd worked in the counseling office of the high school –the fruits of her secondary degree earned in social work from Salem State – often trying to instill hope and perspective in teenagers struggling to find either. "Miss Fredette" was identified by the administration-at-large as the person you went to when things were going wrong at school … and sometimes at home.

For a campus with less than 300 students, she did a lot of business.

The morning after the weekend of Jenna's funeral service, however, most of the visitors were colleagues or fellow staff members who popped in to express their best wishes, to offer their "thoughts and prayers." Sunny hadn't made it known in any official way precisely what had precipitated her sister's death, but everyone knew.

It came as a surprise when Ned Wheatley rapped on her open office door that morning shortly after the bell announcing the 9 o' clock classes had rung.

"Hey," he said.

She looked up from the note she was writing. "Hey."

If Central Casting had specified a "handsome sad-sack" type Wheatley would have qualified without question. While he possessed the hale, ruddy coloring of a Scotsman and a crown of curly hair that looked like he'd worked at it (though he hadn't), he had the sunken eyes and dullness of preoccupation that intimated he was suffering some unexpressed disappointment or defeat. While he could be affectionate and attentive enough, Wheatley was also a seemingly incurable hypochondriac ever clinging to some imagined malady or condition, and if and when something actually was physically troubling he tended to catastrophize, a state that Sunny at her most indulgent found wearying.

"What are you doing here, Ned?" she asked, realizing this sounded more defensive than she felt at the moment.

Wheatley swallowed and looked abashed. "You didn't answer your phone this morning. I wanted to make sure you were all right, that's all."

She came out from behind her desk and leaned into him for an embrace. "Thanks." In the moment, she felt guilty for something she'd told Dr. Mooney a few weeks before, when the disconnect between herself and Wheatley, in her mind, had become more palpable: "I'd rather be lonely than be alone."

What the hell did that mean?

She'd also come to prefer the weighted blanket.

Uncharacteristically shunting her responsibilities for 10 minutes, she escorted him to the school cafeteria which kids had nicknamed The Caf. At this time of the morning, before the lunch recess, it was nearly empty. She did recognize the vice principal, one of her loyal allies on the staff, sitting across the sterile

room opposite an older Black woman in a tightly buttoned military uniform and anvil shaped cap.

Sunny recapped the services for her sister and their aftermath in as few sentences as she could. Wheatley did not ask questions which made it easier to transition to a different though related topic.

"Jenna had been encouraging me to write a graphic novel," she said, sounding as uncertain in the telling as she was about the prospect. "I kept saying to her 'I'm no writer.' No artist either."

"But now you're thinking about it?"

"I've got an idea," she said with sudden resolve. "I can write it. And I can picture it."

Wheatley hadn't heard anything approaching much enthusiasm from her in weeks; he leaned forward. "A new comic book heroine?" he grinned.

"No," she said drily and immediately. "It's more personal than that."

"And what's that?"

"Here's the cover," she said, "drawing" with one finger in the air. "A bottle of booze. Something …" She air-drew a shape. "Like a rounded whiskey bottle."

Wheatley squinted, attempting to "see."

"And inside the bottle, transparent so you can see, you know," she continued piercing the air like pressing a button, "a little girl in braids trying to get out, pounding at the glass with her fists."

He leaned back and exhaled. "I don't get it, Sunny."

Sunny flinched. "Really? This doesn't sound familiar to you? It doesn't seem that subtle."

A shadow fell over their table. The vice principal, auburn haired Ellen Waye, was accompanied by the woman in the military uniform, who stood at least half a foot taller than she. "Excuse me, Sunny," Waye said with a friendly glance of recognition toward Wheatley. "I just wanted to introduce you to

Captain Laurel Jepsen. She's here to do an ROTC presentation for some of our girls."

Hello's, including with Wheatley, were exchanged perfunctorily, after which the ROTC officer apologized and retreated. Waye lay a hand on Sunny's shoulder and leaned down. "When you get a moment, Sunny," she said, "can I talk to you?"

"Uh, sure."

Wheatley's generally downcast affect appeared further downcast. "Does this mean you have to go?"

Sunny unwrapped the strap of her purse from the back of the chair and hung it over her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Ned, but this could be important."

"I thought we were important."

"We are."

"You don't sound sure."

"Ned." She screeched back her chair and stood. "It's just that now's not the best place and time. OK? Why don't I call you later? Tonight?"

Deliberately, Wheatley rose from his own seat. "Whatever, Sunny."

"Ned, don't be a …" She withheld the male equivalent of a "b-word," remembering where she was – in a room sparsely populated but with just enough young impressionables to be exposed to the school counselor's lapse in decorum. "I'm sorry," she said, and she left.

Den.

Ned backwards.

A crazy, impossible … inevitable coincidence.

Her low-heeled but audible walk down one sterile high school office corridor toward another was automatic.

Memories, not so much.

She'd met Dennis Sproul, who would be her first real 16-year-old boyfriend, at a party, one featuring illicit punch in a plastic bowl. Prophetic as it would turn out.

Den, blonder than she, bolder than she, older than she by 15 months, had already mastered the fine art of seduction. Lonely at home and to that point regarded by boys mainly as a "brain with a body" – in that order – Sunny was helpless against both his charms and his manipulations.

They'd danced, slow and close together, to Foreigner's "I Want To Know What Love Is," and during Sunny felt as if she'd died and gone to teenage dating heaven.

He took her virginity less than a week after that punch party. She remembered how it felt to stand in the hot spray of a shower 15 minutes later, her eyes closed, her skin wet, soap in her hair, unsure whether anything in or about her had changed.

She remembered as the water rained down on her that it began to rinse away the odor of whiskey.

Her closest friend in school at the time, Liv Garrison, had whispered conspiratorily in her ear one day outside of a classroom doorway "I hear Den Sproul nailed you."

That's how she felt. Nailed.

Ultimately, when shit-faced at her graduation pool party around Aunt Pris' pool, Dennis Sproul staggered over a lawn chair and crashed back-first through the glass top of a patio table. He was taken away in an ambulance.

Vice Principal Waye's office door was ajar when she arrived. Sunny observed her at her desk, back to her, typing on a desktop computer.

She tapped the doorjamb with two fingers. "H'lo?"

Ellen Waye swiveled around in her desk chair. "Hi. Please come in." She promptly strode to the door to her office and eased it closed. "Sit down, Sunny," she waved toward a guest chair.

The woman who had hired her and already given her two pay raises did not employ small talk. They'd known each other for two years, and though Sunny knew little of Waye's life outside of the high school campus, her supervisor knew just enough of hers to be confidential.

"Your mother called me yesterday," she began without preliminaries. She folded her hands together on the desk and let a significant pause ensue. "I'm sure she'd been drinking."

"Ahhh shit," Sunny reacted under her breath and looked away. Then she apologized, for her word. But before she could make the bigger apology, Waye reached across the desk and pressed Sunny's jacketed forearm.

"It's all right, Sunny. It wasn't abusive. I was able to cut it short."

"But what was it about?"

"I think," returned Waye gently, "she was still very upset over your sister's … passing. Her anger at you …"

"At me? What did I do?" Sunny stopped herself. You couldn't argue from logic with drunks, any of them. When the hell would she GET that?

"I'm sorry, Ellen," she calmed down. "I'll see that this doesn't happen again. Really."

After a reassuring nod, Waye came around the desk and stood by and over her. "Sunny. Do you need some help? Some guidance?"

"I'm not a drinker."

"I didn't mean that. I meant with you know, your family."

Sunny was direct. "No."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes." Direct again. Having Waye standing while she was seated gave her a tension headache.

"Look," she offered easing up from her chair. "I appreciate your caring. It means a lot. But you should know that I'm on this."

"On it?"

"That I am handling what I can here: And that's me."

The office phone on Waye's desk jingled.

Sunny startled. So strange, so throwback, so sudden to hear a landline phone ring. Like she was alive in another era.

She stewed at her own desk for five minutes about what she'd say to Helena when she called her to follow up on this troubling report. It was more than the phone call to her boss. Everything came back, in one miserable cascade: all the other drunken phone calls over the years – to neighbors, to relatives, to her friends and boyfriends; the brief period in which Helena's mother, Sunny's grandmother, had lived with them, and a wasted Helena had beaten up her own mother, necessitating a call to the police from neighbors; the repeated discovery of her mother's crashed out body atop her unmade bed, snoring and drooling into the pillows.

Yes, she stewed. But she could not make herself call her mother.

"THE BOTTLE" – STORYBOARD

Toby, sitting alone at classroom desk; teacher talking; he looks sad and distracted.

Teacher holds up ship model inside a bottle.

Toby sees in bottle image of Sonny Moonshine, who "greets" him.

Teacher calls on him, rousing him from his daydream.

At recess or lunch he talks to girl "friend"; she says she studied for test; he says he couldn't because his dad was being LOUD.

She says "What's wrong?" He won't say.

Mom didn't show up to pick him up from school; walking home alone, Sonny "accompanies" him, taunts him: "I'm your friend, Toby."

"No, you're not."

Toby gets home; mom is crashed out on sofa.

Upstairs alone, in his room, he tries to write homework – it turns into image of Sonny Moonshine; "You're not alone, Toby. I live here and I'm here to stay. I'm not going anywhere!"

The first one to read what she'd done so far, Ned Wheatley, remarked with a breathy chuckle "Sonny Moonshine? That's funny as hell!" It was at that moment that Sunny resolved to take a needed break from whatever this sham of a relationship was.

In the very next moment, while she was closing the door of her apartment on the departing Wheatley, her phone chimed. It was her father.

"Thought you'd like to come by and visit, Sunday," he said, the usual growl in his voice tinged with amity. "You know, under better circumstances now."

"You mean you, me and Maeve?"

"Yeah. Anything wrong with that?"

"No."

"Then how about tomorrow night? I'll make scampi." It was the one dish Fredette, in between marriages, had taught himself how to prepare, and he did so respectably.

Her natural suspicion of why her father wanted to see her now – he hadn't done this in so long she couldn't remember when – caused Sunny to hesitate. But she relented. She accepted. She talked herself out of suspicion and paranoia and whatever else wanted her to run instead in the opposite direction from Jack Fredette.

So there had to be a pretext for this invitation which had come out of the blue. Sunny entertained possible scenarios on her drive 20 miles away to her father's neighborhood:

He and Maeve were splitting up. No, they wouldn't summon her for such an announcement. They hadn't bothered to tell her they were getting married until a week after the fact.

He was retiring. No, he'd unofficially done so a year ago when he'd decided to work from home at reduced hours (if not reduced pay … generous company).

He and Maeve were having a child. She laughed out loud, behind the wheel, practically spitting on the dashboard it was so incongruous.

Her heart caught in her throat when it occurred to her that she'd laughed out loud for the first time in a long while.

Sunny thought about "The Bottle" the nearer she got to her father's townhome, which was situated in one of those would-be-McMansion developments in which the places looked palatial from the outside but were comprised of small, airless rooms and rank uniformity on the inside. She'd never written anything that wasn't for school or for work all the way through, beginning to end, much less a story like the imagined graphic novel's. Adding to the intimidation of the project was trying not merely to write but to write with accompanying cartoon images in mind as well. Who would create those in partnership with herself, and where would she find such a person of like mind and, in this case, shared pain?

The neighborhood just a mile or so from her father's gated planned community was still in transition along some urban redevelopment continuum. For every neat array of planted trees and shiny colored bicycle rack there were weedy vacant lots still awaiting transformation, or at least a buyer, and here and there folks quite visibly down on their luck. Sunny ached when passing by a bent, pelf-covered man in bare feet tethering along with him a limping, underfed black-and-white dog. At a stoplight just down the street

from them, she hastily searched her purse for bills and came up with just two of the kind you had to pay and mail at the end of the month.

She resumed her drive. One of the loneliest things about writing "The Bottle" now was that, Wheatley's ambivalence aside, there was no one really to share her progress or even the idea with. Surely her mother or April would take offense; colleagues at work who were indeed colleagues more than were they friends would regard it as confirmation of their suspicions that she came from a family of alcoholics. Maybe SHE was a drunk too, they'd think. She looked washed out in the mornings sometimes. She usually ate lunch alone. Was she drinking her lunch in her car or something like that? But she never smelled of booze.

Jack Fredette was probably the only one in her clan she could tell about the book. One thing you had to say for the man – he wasn't in denial about his drinking, nor was he apologetic about it. He was only defensive when her mother challenged him, which she would at every hypocritical opportunity, but then it was tit for tat.

Jesus. Not even there yet and she was, again, wishing she were going somewhere else other than to see/meet/embrace? a member of her family.

When Maeve answered the door it was obvious to Sunny that the cocktail hour had been under way for some time. Her sea green eyes were just a little woozy, her russet hair, graying at the tips, a little wayward, her welcoming "hello" just a little unsteady. The name Maeve, from the Irish meaning "intoxicating," was beyond ironical. Just another dipsomaniacal Fredette, Sunny had decided from the outset.

No one could accuse Maeve of not being a gracious hostess this afternoon, however. She pulled Sunny toward her, probably more ardently than she'd intended, and smacked her cheek with red lipstick lips. From over her shoulder and somewhere near in the house, Jack Fredette's exhortation was heard:

"C'mon in, Sunday!"

Her father had his vintage hi-fi going in the den, the man cave of the type Helena would never have tolerated, appointed as it was with a wet bar, a big-screen TV, a neon Hamm's beer sign complete with grinning Hamm's bear, and shelves of vinyl jazz records in their original jackets. It was dark enough for developing film, and Sunny strained to adjust to the light as the sounds of Dave Brubeck on piano and Paul Desmond on sax washed over her and, by her side and barefoot, Maeve.

Jack greeted her with a high ball in one hand and the record jacket to Brubeck's "Time Out" in the other.

They foisted a cocktail upon her, sat her down and wasting no time, informed Sunny that they'd bought a condo in Las Vegas and were moving in a month, two at the most.

So this was the news. Sunny, sipping at the mixed drink her father had concocted, admitted to relief. It was nothing dark or dramatic, nothing about health or financial welfare. They were in gay spirits, both of them, toasting Sin City and boasting of living a safe distance away from the high rollers but close enough for vicarious excitement, and once even getting up to dance to the Brubeck record's jaunty rendition of "Kathy's Waltz."

Sunny could hardly begrudge them their ebullience, but it did gnaw at her that her father had so apparently moved on from the overdose death of a daughter to "movin' to Vegas!" mode.

"Bite your tongue, girl," she told herself, swishing the ice around in her glass and eyeing her father and Maeve cutting the rug as only two people who'd had a couple belts could manage.

She set her drink down on a green-and-white New York Jets coaster. For some damned reason that priest's "higher higher higher / lower lower lower" whipped through her brain. In an instant she seemed to see him, wrapped in green and white vestments, dancing solo just a few feet away from Jack and Maeve.

At dinner, not scampi after all but delivery from Chinese Dragon, Fredette ventured where Sunny had to that point avoided going. It began with an indictment of Helena, ground her father had traveled many times before, particularly when he'd been drinking. To her credit, Maeve did not pile on. But Sunny's entreaties of "Come on, Dad. Please?" did not slow the momentum of her father's harangue.

When he got to decrying his ex-wife's "shitty behavior" at Jenna's "friggin' wake," Sunny could hold back no longer.

"So you remember my sister's name," she interjected, hearing the tenor of her voice swell suddenly with irritation.

"What the hell does that mean?" he retaliated.

Sunny dropped her crumpled napkin on the tabletop. "It means you seem to have forgotten that this family is one fewer. God damnit." Her words were strangled as they poured out. "Didn't you know this was coming?"

Maeve grasped futilely at her wrist and missed.

Sunny had sprung to her feet and in doing so brought the remains of her drink onto her skirt. Then the glass clanged to the hardwood floor.

Her father slapped the top of the table so hard everything on it shook. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Never mind. Just go off to Vegas and the hell with everyone else. Fine!"

A shouting match was over scarcely after it started. In yanking back his chair in a fury, Fredette instead went over backwards in it. He was stunned but completely unhurt, and retained the wherewithal to demand at the top of his voice that "Miz Perfect, you're so pious, you're so high and mighty, get the hell outta here!"

"So you're saying what, Sunny? You had no fun on that trip to Greece with your sisters?"

"That's precisely what I'm saying, Mooney. Every day and certainly every night was built around the first drink. Jenna was impossible from like 3 o' clock on. She HAD to get to a bar."

Dr. Mooney nodded. "And your sister April?"

"Complained about it. To Jenna and then when it was obvious Jenna wasn't listening, she complained to me. As if I could do anything about it."

"But as the oldest sister ..."

"That didn't count for much." Sunny collapsed back into her leather chair, which faced Dr. Mooney's leather chair. "Part of me wants to go back to Greece someday and give it another chance." She paused. "Part of me can't bear to do so."

Mooney asked her about her relationship now with her sister April.

"I love her," said Sunny without having to think about it. "But ... I don't like her."

"And your parents?"

"Let's move on, all right?"

Ned Wheatley had pointed out to her, in between hypochondriacal asides about a strange pain he'd been experiencing in his rib cage, that it was "interesting" that none of the three Fredette daughters, all of them over 30 ("well ... neither" he amended clumsily, remembering that Jenna was gone), had married or even been close to it. Were they, he proffered in his less than diplomatic fashion, all so particular? Or just "unlucky?"

Sunny was accustomed to these artless moments from Ned who tended to speak without thinking, but she gave the question more consideration than she let on. Of course there was the logical explanation: children of alcoholic parents, especially if they exhibited alcoholic tendencies themselves, were not likely to enjoy sustained relationships, romantic or otherwise. Another

explanation? Jack and Helena constituted such toxic marital role models that any sane product of their union would avoid the institution like the plague, lest the toxicity be repeated.

But the fact was Sunny hadn't found someone with whom she even remotely considered long-term relationship material. Nor did she feel bound by family or societal expectations to marry. Aunt Pris, in her own cups one yuletide, had told her that "I shouldn't say this, Sunny, but you're the prettiest," which was Pris' code for "most likely to catch a man."

It was Aunt Pris now who asked her to visit April with her. She said she had an early birthday present for her youngest niece but she didn't drive the freeways much anymore and April lived two freeways away.

Sunny agreed to drive her there.

She found herself telling Aunt Pris about "The Bottle." Somewhat to her surprise, her aunt was interested.

"These comic books can make a lot of money," she said beside Sunny in the car. "Maybe even turn into a movie. Like 'Wonder Woman.'"

"It's not exactly that kind of 'comic,' Aunt Pris," Sunny reminded her, eyes on the road. She elaborated on the premise and in so doing could perceive Pris' enthusiasm beginning to wane. The lines around her mouth tightened; she blinked her distant blue eyes as though disturbed in thought.

"I have something," Sunny wound up, "that I need and want to say with this book."

Her aunt didn't hesitate this time. "About drinking? About drinking too much? You think kids will want to read about that?" she sputtered.

"Not just kids," Sunny asserted.

She felt her aunt clutch her shoulder, though gently enough to not distract the driving. "Why not spend your time and energy on a happy story, Sunny? There are so many happy stories to tell."

"Maybe mine will wind up happy," Sunny replied. "I have a long way to go yet."

She glanced at her aunt, whose stony expression indicated that she was more than doubtful; she was unconvinced.

April met them on the front porch of her small but curb-appealing Craftsman house. A CPA, she worked from home these days and had ever since the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, so Sunny wasn't surprised to find her in sweat shirt and pajama pants even if a disapproving Aunt Pris was, and said so. April took this in stride as she escorted her aunt inside, acknowledging Sunny with a quick "Hi" and no more.

As with practically every gathering she'd attended at April's, most of them with her mother and sisters, the kitchen was the site of all activity. A marble island with barstools around it served this purpose well, as did the fact that two garden-facing casement windows made the kitchen the brightest, cheeriest room in the otherwise drab house.

Aunt Pris perched herself at the head barstool and, with coffee, efficiently grilled her niece about her job and, off topic, what she thought of this or that celebrity in the news.

Sunny spied almost immediately, on a side table where the cell phone recharger and fax machine rested, a half-empty wine glass. She ignored this until her aunt excused herself for the ladies room.

"Why are you drinking wine at 11 in the morning, April?"

Her sister looked over at the side table, then without affect back at her. "Because I want to."

"Do you do this every morning?"

"It's none of your business. OK?"

"But April, Christ!"

"You 'Christ'! You're always saying things that hurt me, Sunny. You can't help yourself."

"I'm just pointing out that you're drinking wine before noon. If that hurts then it's the truth hurting."

"You fuck yourself."

Aunt Pris, calling from the next room and likely aware of the contretemps, was on her way back.

Sunny and April positioned themselves as far from each other as possible in the suddenly claustrophobic Craftsman house kitchen. The ensuing 10 minutes, comprised of conversation between a tense, truculent April and the knowing Aunt Pris about anything but the elephant in the room, left Sunny isolated. She sat alone on the lumpy cushion of a bay window, her legs crossed, listening not to what her sister and aunt were saying at all but to the voice in her head that flitted from "higher higher higher / lower lower lower" to "I'm worried about your sister's drinking" to racing repetitions of "I want this," "I need this," "Stop ganging up on me," "To HELL with you" and "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

When April left the room to answer her cellphone ringing in the foyer, Sunny made the futile gesture of pouring out what was left of the glass of wine on the side table. Her aunt, watching from the island barstool, just stared at her.

A long day of administrative paperwork and one single visit from a student – a perpetual truant whose decidedly snotty superiority disinclined Sunny from having any sympathy for him – seemed at a merciful end. It was 4 p.m. on the dot. She'd shut down her office computer, locked her records book and documents in a drawer and closed the blinds over the window. Home, and a quick run in her sweats before manufacturing some kind of evening meal, awaited.

There was Vice Principal Waye in her doorway.

"Sorry, Sunny but can you take one more?" she asked, sincere apology visible in her knitted brow.

"Well …"

"Thanks." Waye looked to the left. "Bella? Come in, please. Come on. I said right now."

Before Sunny could rise from her desk chair, a slight, slumping teenager eased past the vice principal and lethargically entered. There was something of the Lydia Deetz from "Beetlejuice" in her large dark eyes and raven hair going awry, but her attire – crop top, low-rise jeans, lace-up Dr. Martens boots, and the backpack secured at the shoulders – was typical of most of the girls on campus. Sunny guessed her at 16, no older.

Bella regarded Sunny like an alien from another world and didn't appear to understand why she was where she was. It didn't help that Ellen Waye tossed a parting "Thanks, Sunny!" and was out the door, leaving student and counselor alone and together.

Once the girl had been instructed to take a seat a few feet away from Sunny, she let out a sigh, tilted her head back in exasperation and, to Sunny's surprise, pulled a lavender vape device about the size and shape of a Pez dispenser from an inside pocket of her jeans. She handed it to Sunny just as the latter was saying "You can't smoke that in here …"

Sunny took it gingerly. "Don't tell me," she said, shaking her head in annoyance, "you were sent in here to me because they caught you vaping in a hallway." She didn't finish the rest of what she wanted to say: "For this they're keeping me – and you – past 4 o' clock?"

"I wasn't vaping anywhere at school," said the girl, tugging at one ear. "I just thought I'd better give it to you before you took it away anyhow."

Sunny nodded. "Here." She handed it back. "Now tell me what's going on. By the way, I'm Ms. Fredette."

"Thanks." The girl looked surprised. She shoved the vaping device back into her jeans pocket. "Yeah, I know who you are. I saw you once before. Last year."

"You did?" Sunny cocked her head. "I don't think I remember."

"You might not. I was with two other girls. In the cafeteria. That song we did? From 'Xanadu?'"

"Oh," Sunny said, remembering a musical skit day a year ago for the entertainment of students, faculty and staff. It was hodgepodge and over-amplified but silly fun all considered. She seemed to recollect a trio of girls laughing their way through "Have You Never Been Mellow," with which they serenaded a seated, red-faced Principal Mike Stevenson.

"Well, that wasn't an official … visit, Bella."

"But this is." The girl sniffed. "Mrs. Waye told me it was."

"And why?"

The tale came haltingly and with clear embarrassment, but it came. Bella admitted that she'd called a girl seated in the aisle away from her, one who'd been "screwing with me on Instagram," a bitch, out loud, then used the same word on the substitute teacher at the front of the classroom who'd scolded her. For the class as a whole, it'd been in Bella's words "comedy central."

But she hadn't sounded smug or snarky or unrepentant in the telling. Quite the opposite. Her voice softened to a whisper by the time she got to the sub's taking her in the hall and shortly afterward summoning Vice Principal Waye.

Sunny felt for her. This was not a petulant teen-brat, a type she'd dealt with too many times in her tenure. There was, she was certain, more than met the eye about Bella.

She did say: "Bella, I know this sounds like one of your parents talking, but I've got to say it. Aren't you too old to behave like that in a classroom?"

Bella's grey eyes turned icy. "Don't talk about my parents."

"Well," said Sunny, "you probably know they're going to be notified about what happened in class today."

"Don't call them." Bella sat forward and there was fresh urgency in her voice.

Sunny pressed the girl's wrist. "Maybe I won't have to." She resigned herself to being in consultation with the girl for a while, and she didn't mind staying late now.

Madison Mooney had asked her how she felt when she discovered -- hidden behind a piece of furniture or amid cleaning products in the cupboard beneath the sink or even in a clothes closet draped over with coats -- empty or near-empty bottles of wine, vodka or gin. "And you were what, 14?" she'd sought to clarify.

"Something like that," Sunny had told her. "At first I discovered them by accident – when I switched on a lamp or went into Helena's bedroom to borrow a pair of shoes. But then I came to expect them. They smelled too."

"You understood your mother had a drinking problem?"

"My mother and my father. And my grandparents on Helena's side. Whenever they came to visit they brought with them a case of something – beer maybe."

"Did you speak to your parents about this?" Mooney had wondered.

"No," Sunny had said. "But my mother. She knew I knew. I don't know why she went to the trouble of hiding all the bottles. It didn't make any difference."

"And you handled this … how?"

"What do you mean 'handled'?"

"How you felt about this situation at home?"

Sunny had said: "That's the trouble. I didn't handle it."

Bella, whose last name turned out to be Mowry, confided that her parents were divorced, that her half-sister resided with her father across town, that she "despised" high school and that she desperately wanted to stop looking

at her social media apps. By way of this background, Sunny surmised, the girl was attempting to explain if not justify her outbursts in class that day.

She reminded Sunny of some of the girls she knew in her own high school days: essentially loners who didn't fit in with any one clique yet who wanted friends and even a tribe badly just the same; those who feuded with others of their sex and regarded the males of the species as too immature to bother with; girls who felt perhaps not that the world was against them but that high school certainly was. .

Sunny saw some of this in herself, such as the often-viral negativity that other girls spread on a high school campus and how hurt she'd been by it at times. But she hadn't been a loner. She'd molded herself to fit in with many different kinds of girls and boys too, and rather than resenting the obligation of being a student she clung to it like a lifeline from matters unhappy and sodden at home.

For the moment, she addressed what she considered Bella's most fixable complaint. "You know, there are apps that you can upload to limit or block your social media distractions, Bella," she said. "Or you can keep a diary and try to minimize your time on Instagram or TikTok yourself."

Bella's glance out the office window indicated she was not impressed by these suggestions.

"Or invest your time in something else," said Sunny, pivoting. "Like what you enjoy doing." She waited until the girl looked at her again. "What DO you like doing?"

"Listening to music mostly," Bella said after a beat. "Sometimes drawing."

"Drawing what?"

"Whatever. I like manga. I'm Instagram friends with a girl in Tokyo. She draws her own manga 'zine."

It was the first piece of very specific information Bella had volunteered, and the first moment of borderline enthusiasm shown as well. Sunny ran with it, asking the girl more about her friend and the artform.

Though peppered with s- and f-words, Bella's fervor over this subject was something Sunny deemed encouraging and an entry point into helping the girl. Inevitably in the conversation, she found herself telling Bella about "The Bottle."

"Writing," she explained, "is something I like to do. And this is an important book to me. I'm working through some things of my own."

"Like what?" Bella was direct.

"I don't know," Sunny hesitated.

"Come on. Like what?"

It was not appropriate, Sunny thought, to share her personal life with a student, and especially not in this area, but Bella proved more intuitive than she'd figured.

"'The Bottle,' huh?" she said, as if reciting the title. "It's about drinking?"

Startled, Sunny hurried "I don't really drink."

Bella cocked her head knowingly. "My mom does. She's probably drunk right now."

Four times over the next two weeks, Bella Mowry visited Sunny in her office at the school, each time with something to show and share with her: manga illustrations she'd created. The first, a girl warrior possessing golden straw hair and fierce, piercing-blue eyes, bore no resemblance to the artist herself. But the next, which Bella had also titled with Japanese letters that she said translated to "FIERCE," looked more like herself … with blacker hair and a more angular face, but recognizably Bella Mowry.

The third, this one all in black and white ink, depicted two huge-eyed girls on the floor, reading from a book; and the fourth, which depicted a tall, head-banded woman with a half-smile standing in back of a serene-looking

younger girl in a kind of wizard's robe, glowed in blue and silver and, Sunny thought, spoke for itself.

She'd become a mentor and perhaps a friend.

Ned Wheatley leaned across the table at the cantina and raised his voice just enough that he could be heard over the din of closely seated together customers. "I said I've had these dizzy spells the last three mornings, Sunny. First I thought it was just getting up from bed too fast, or not drinking enough water the night before so like I got dehydrated? Then it happened coming out of the bank and I told myself I'd better see Dr. Hollander. But he just told me to get this Bonine stuff over the counter."

Sunny exhaled. "Really, Ned? Now?"

He lifted a forkful of enchilada. "Now what?"

Rather than pointing out – again – that the subject of his health was tiresome and tedious, Sunny pushed aside her own Mexican dinner and told him that she'd completed the first chapter of her graphic novel.

Wheatley chewed, swallowed, set down his fork. "You're still working on that?"

"Naturally," she said, feeling offended. "What, you thought it was just a whim?"

"I'm sorry," he said, busying himself with his napkin. "That's not what I meant, Sunny."

"Well what did you mean?"

"Look." He reached across the table and clasped the fingers of her left hand in his. "I think it's terrific that you're writing and all. It's just the subject. With all that's happened you really want to write about … booze?"

"This is not about booze."

"Well, not booze, but … how can writing this make you happy?"

Sunny harbored the same disgust she'd harbored two relationships ago, when the man she'd been seeing, a handsome but high-minded college

professor, reacted to the music she had playing in her apartment with a wince and "How can you listen to this????"

"Ned, you're pushing it," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

She bit her tongue. All right. She knew. The reason she kept seeing Ned Wheatley, who periodically infuriated or exasperated her, was that he *didn't* have a drinking problem. One Corona at the cantina and he was done.

"Jesus," she leaned her forehead into one hand. "I'm judgy or I'm sick."

She'd been feeling generally down the day after the cantina exchange and more than a little lonely, so at school instead of eating lunch in her office as she typically did, Sunny went to the cafeteria at noontime, found a free table and sat down with the salad she'd brought from home. A few of her peers were in the room among the student diners, including Grace, the woman who occupied the adjoining office in the counseling wing of the admin building. The two rarely spoke outside of quick hello's and goodbye's and never consulted on student issues, so Sunny wasn't surprised that Grace didn't even look up when she sat down not far away.

"Hi. Howzit going?"

There was Bella Mowry, carrying a cafeteria tray holding a plated sandwich and a soda in a plastic cup.

Sunny greeted her with a quick smile. "I'm fine, Bella." She swept a strand of blonde hair out of her face and gestured to a chair across the table. "You wouldn't want to sit down, would you?" She recognized the probable perception that if a student sat with a counselor that meant she had problems.

Bella seized the opportunity without delay, clambering into the vacant seat and setting her pale orange tray onto the table. "I don't care what they say over there," she said, nodding her head toward a mixed group of teenagers a few tables to their right. "It's not like you're a teacher. Anyway, I wanted to tell you something."

Sunny decided to ignore the attention of some of the students in the room as well. "Sure. What's on your mind?"

"Well, I was just wondering," the girl said, shoving her tray to one side, "if you'd let me read the book you're writing."

"Read my book? Bella, it's far from finished. And what I've got's in pretty sloppy shape. I don't think you'd want to read it."

"But I would. Maybe I could help."

Sunny shook her head. "No, Bella. I appreciate your offer and your interest in the book, too, but … well, let's wait until I'm finished. Then if you'd like to read it, that'd be fine."

Bella Mowry sat back and crossed her arms. "You think it'll upset me, don't you, Miss Fredette?"

"I don't know."

The girl's arms uncrossed and she leaned forward. "Why would you write this book if it was upsetting?"

Sunny stole a private glance at her hands, now folded in her lap. That was a question, a pointed one and a legitimate one and, she admitted to herself, a painful one. Without answering Bella's questions she tried to redirect their conversation to the topic of the teenager's growing body of manga illustrations, praising her ingenuity and her progress as she did.

Bella demurred. Lifting her tray, she stood over the table again. "I'm sorry I asked you about your book."

"You don't have to be."

A boy called to Bella from behind and she turned around. "See you later," she called back to Sunny, and was gone.

On what would have been Jenna's 30th birthday, Sunny's mother phoned her, and she'd been drinking.

Less than a minute into the call, Helena floated the idea of the three of them – herself, Sunny and April – driving out to the cemetery and leaving flowers at Jenna's gravesite. Before Sunny could respond, her mother said: "I just hope you and your sister don't spend the whole time guilting me. You know?"

Sunny had learned over the years that it was useless arguing with her mother, or her father when they'd been drinking. Jenna too.

Yet she reacted. "Why would we be guilting you? If we go out there it'd be about Jenna."

"Who I loved."

"Who we all loved."

"Who I can't talk to anymore," her mother's voice cracked. She dropped the phone and it clunked on the other end of the line.

"Mother?"

She was back. "You know, it seemed like every time Jenna and I talked the past year it turned into a fight. I never wanted to fight with her. She was my girl."

Elaboration on this came awash in slurs and sobs.

Sunny squeezed the cellphone in her hand, squeezed it hard. I can't break down. I can't go there with her. I have to have compassion, patience.

"Father Hanley told me," Helena was saying now, "that God forgives us anything. So how can we not forgive ourselves? You know what I mean?"

"Higher higher higher," Sunny whispered into the phone.

"What was that?" her mother demanded.

"I said … stop beating yourself up, Mother. Jenna loved you."

Helena's tenor changed in an instant. "Oh, you're always equivocating, Sunny Fredette. You know what? You're a bullshit artist. A grownup, thirty-something, single, unattached bullshit artist!"

"The voice of sanity in the family," Sunny stated coldly.

"Yeah, the voice of fucking sanity. From the oldest, the smartest …"

"Mother, do we have to do this?"

"I just wanted to go to the cemetery. You want me to shut up."

"What I want," Sunny stiffened, now on her feet in her living room, "is for you to get some help. With your drinking. Please, Mother."

"Oh to tell with you!"

Helena hung up.

Sunny stared at the CALL ENDED on the face of her phone then tossed it toward the sofa. She missed and it landed on the floor.

It hadn't occurred to Sunny until more than two weeks had elapsed that she hadn't seen or heard from Bella Mowry. No cafeteria sightings. No manga illustrations in her in-box. Not even any glimpses across the campus as each went about the school day.

Because it had begun to nag at her, she popped into Ellen Waye's office on an end-of-the-day Friday afternoon just as the vice principal was gathering her belongings to head out for the weekend.

"Bella Mowry?" Waye asked, blinking. "Hasn't she been at school?"

"I don't know," Sunny said, crossing her arms in the VP's doorway. "I haven't seen her, but it's a big campus."

Waye was in a hurry. "Let me see what I can find out on Monday, Sunny," she said, producing the keys to her office and untwisting out of her desk chair. "I'll be in touch. OK?"

Whatever harried insouciance Ellen Waye had conveyed that Friday afternoon had vanished when she cornered Sunny in a corridor mid-Monday and, ensuring that their conversation was not going to be overheard, leaned in confidentially.

"It's Bella Mowry," she said. "She's been absent for 11 days now." Waye lowered her voice further. "Her mother was arrested, taken to a psychiatric hospital on something called a 51-50 hold. I think the woman tried to do harm to herself."

"And Bella?"

"I'm told she's at a relative's house. We're hoping she returns to school."

"What can I do?" Sunny asked.

"I don't think there's anything you can do, dear," said Waye. "It's a difficult situation. When Bella comes back …"

"When will that be?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry." She tapped Sunny's shoulder. "I'll keep you up to date."

Unspoken in her conversation with the vice principal was that Sunny was not permitted to seek out Bella Mowry. That was beyond her purview. She was tempted, after school hours that Monday, to drive over to the girl's home – she had the address. But not only would this incur the wrath of her superiors, it presented a possible scenario that was conceivably out of her realm. And she didn't even know if the girl was there.

Still – the next morning, before she went to work, Sunny left a note in the mailbox of the Mowry house that she'd written the evening before. If Bella's mother read it first … well, she had to take that chance.

"Bella: I'm thinking about you and your mother and hoping all is well. When you are ready to return to school, you know where my office is."

She considered a "Bless you both" to close the note, but decided that might sound patronizing, or insincere – though she wished as she finished

writing that whatever God was in heaven might give the girl strength. And give herself strength. But no, it was asking too much, even of God.

She'd just signed the letter: *"Miss Fredette."*

"I'm sorry, April. I planned to go along to the cemetery. You decided to go on a weekday while I was working."

Sunny secured the phone uneasily on her shoulder as she unpacked groceries in the kitchen.

"I was not 'trying to get out of it.' I don't care what she said. April, that's … well, don't blame me."

The call died. Or was killed.

"Shit." Sunny lay the phone on the linoleum and continued unpacking the groceries. In so doing, she pulled from the reusable Vons bag the bottle of Stag's Leap chardonnay she'd added to the heap. It'd been a long time since she'd bought wine for herself and brought a bottle home. Usually it was purchased when she knew Ned or a friend was coming by socially.

"Never drink alone, girl." That had been her self-imposed policy for as long as she could remember.

Feeling ambitious, or hungrier than usual, she troubled herself to make a salmon piccata dressed with garlic, lemon and capers. That's what the chard was for, she resolved, adding the wine to the simmering skillet. She'd have a glass with her special dinner too.

A lesser woman might sit down before a meal like this one, with the tempting fish accompanied by freshly steamed vegetables and garlic mash, stare at it and consider the loneliness of the occasion. It wasn't the sort of dinner one ate by oneself. Plates for two. Wine glasses for two. Maybe even candles flickering in the middle of the two. Like on a date.

Dancing with Den Sproul to "I Want To Know What Love Is," she'd just about felt her feet leave the floor by the end of the record, when the gospel

chorus joined the refrain. What if she'd left the floor and floated away that night?

Sunny took up her wine glass and realized she'd already drained most of what had been inside. Without taking a single bite. For a second, she examined her blurry image reflected in the bowl of the glass above the delicate stem. She'd forgotten to completely dry her hair after washing it before her solo supper. The tips were wet and the blonde tresses flat and lifeless.

She held up the glass, imagined Sonny Moonbeam staring back at her, rose from her seat and in the same motion hurled it and what was left of the chardonnay into the false fireplace across the room.

When Sunny stopped at the faculty/staff office to check her mailbox for the month's pay, she found a manila envelope inside. Her heart leaped when she pulled it out and saw "Miss Fredette" scrawled on the front in the telltale black ink that Bella employed in her illustrations.

Not bothering to look for her paycheck among what else was in the mailbox, she carried the manila envelope to her office and closed the door behind her. Through the thin walls that separated the counselors' offices, she could hear Grace on a phone call. Then she heard the distant buzzer on campus that sounded the beginning of classes for the day.

She took her chair, lay the envelope in her lap, unclasped it. With her index finger she slid free a sheet of paper, also the kind Bella used in her drawings.

This was an image of a little, doe-eyed manga girl, her mouth agape, her hands outstretched and appearing to press against the glass of a wine bottle that held her captive inside. Bella had drawn a conspicuous crack in the bottle just to the side of the girl's straining fingers. The glass of this bottle would soon break.

She'd printed in the lower right hand corner beneath the image in ornate lettering: OUR BOOK.

"Good evening, everyone. We welcome you to the Haven Al-Anon Family Group and hope you'll find in this fellowship the help and friendship we have been privileged to enjoy. We who live, or have lived, with the issue of alcoholism understand as perhaps few others can."

In her fold-down chair among the two dozen others in the fluorescent-lit room, Sunny set her purse on the floor by her seat, sat up straight and drew a breath. And waited.

" … here tonight. We begin, as always with: 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference."

Most around her had recited in sync with the silver-haired man leading the prayer. Sunny had caught up around the time of "courage to change the things I can."

Now he was saying: "Do we have anyone here tonight visiting or here for the first time?"

She looked around for someone else to raise a hand. No one did.

So it's me. It's on me.

Sunny held up the palm of her right hand.

The group leader acknowledged her with an encouraging nod of the head.

Everyone must have been looking at her, but she looked only at him as she said, gently but with much resolve:

"My name is Theresa, and I'm here for my recovery."

'69

I am an only child of 17. That's all right. I'm never alone.

"The flutter of wings, the sounds of the night, the shadow across the moon, as the Nightbird lifts her wings and soars above the earth into another level of comprehension, where we exist only to feel. Come fly with me, Alison Steele, the Nightbird, on WNEW-FM."

I've got it! It's coming in clear and crisp on the Magnavox AM-FM transistor radio I got at Christmas. WNEW. Music like I've never heard before. And the Nightbird, it's like she's talking just to me at 10 o' clock on a Tuesday night. No woman has ever sounded like this to me. I don't know how to describe her voice, or her breaths, or the little swallows you can hear in between things she's saying about, well, life.

I'm lying on the floor with my head on a pillow and thinking about her and seeing when I look at my bedroom window the dried snowflakes clinging to the glass. It snowed today, pretty hard. Not as hard as it did in the city. I don't usually look at the newspaper, but tonight I read the story in the New York Times about the snow. A reporter named Israel Shenker wrote:

"And it did come to pass that silence filled the canyons of the place called New York, even those distant regions called 'suburbs,' where men still had memory of things called 'trees' and other things called 'flowers.'"

I never read anything like that in a newspaper before. Can they write that way? I suppose so. It's like something I've read in Literature class.

But it's just snow!

The Nightbird is talking again:

"Do you know who you are and where you're at? That's a big order. And sometimes I think if we all could have a focal point, a spot to zero when we know we can touch reality, it would be a lot easier to find out who we are, where're we're at and where we're going."

The music starts again. I look away from the window and up at the ceiling. She has to be speaking to me because this is where I'm at. The books say that's appropriate for my age and sometimes when Dad happens to be listening to me he'll say something like that too.

"You're 17. You'll figure it out." It comes off like a command.

Then Mom will add "In your own time."

I hope it snows again tomorrow. I like the cold because when I dress for it, it feels like somebody's hugging me.

When I was in grade school the other kids and I exchanged little Valentine's Day cards that our parents bought for us in red-and-white heart-shaped packets at the drugstore. You gave them to boys in the class as well as to girls because back then it didn't mean anything serious.

But it hurt when I didn't get any valentines from girls in my class, except the ones who just automatically gave the cards to everybody. I wanted a valentine from Suzie Hjelte or Greta Galt or Tina Dryer, but none of them gave me one. I was too embarrassed and ashamed to tell Mom or Dad about it at the time. Now whenever I see Tina Dryer, who's in my junior class at high school, I ignore her unless I can't avoid it. She's grown up really pretty, too, like I feared, and she still doesn't know I'm alive.

It's Valentine's Day and it's a Friday and for some reason I was thinking that maybe they'd give the high school the day off. When Mom woke me

up, already dressed in her white nurse's uniform and matching shoes, she reminded me that Valentine's Day was strictly "ceremonial" and not a holiday at all. As if I didn't know.

So I have to go.

I've had a few dates already, last year and one over the Christmas holiday. Not that any one of them turned into a second or a third. I think girls look at me and wonder "Why does he call himself 'Marty'? He seems more like a 'Martin' than a 'Marty.' Besides, that's his name." Or they decide I'm … what's the word Dad used? "Gawky." Gawky because I grew so much over last year to this. My clothes probably don't fit right and my hair's too long and I like astronomy. I'm a dork to some.

There's one girl, though: Lesley McAlister. She and I get along fine. We went to the movies a couple of weeks ago, to see "Bullitt" with Steve McQueen, and I'm pretty sure she'll go out with me again. I keep meaning to ask her. I should have gotten her a Valentine's Day card. What'll I do if she gets me one?

Lesley's from a big family, unlike me, and she's smarter than hell. She told me at the movies that she wants to go to Hunter College after she graduates and major in something pre-law, like political science or history. She's also got big beautiful eyes like Natalie Wood's and what I call sable hair that bounces around her shoulders, and the softest, creamiest hands you'll ever touch. Maybe Lesley will be the one.

I give Gil Livingstone, a classmate, a ride to school most days in the '62 Ford Falcon I worked all last summer to buy, and on the way we're talking about Lesley McAlister.

"You'd better get off your behind if you're really interested, Marty," he advises, beside me in front. "The way some of the other guys look at her I can tell she won't be waiting for you."

I take my eyes off the road. "What other guys?"

"Hey. Watch where you're going. There's still ice on the street."

Back to the road. "OK, but what other guys?"

With his neatly combed blonde hair and cardigan sweaters and air of supreme confidence he's what some people might call preppy. But he's an all right guy and if we gave it half a chance we might even be more like buddies than just fellow passengers.

"I can't think of one by name offhand," he says.

This is a relief. He's bullshitting me. Though it makes sense that Lesley McAlister could turn her attentions to a lot of guys at school if she chose to. I don't want to admit Gil has a point, but he does.

I see Lesley across the quad with a girl I don't know. She's hugging textbooks to her sweatered chest and laughing, throwing her head back. I forgot to mention that she also possesses the most perfect white teeth. It irritated me at the time, before our first date, when my Mom told me later that "What sparkling white teeth she has!" It sounded like a commercial.

Now that I think about it, do teeth count? I'll have to ask Gil later on the way home from campus.

I've got less than five minutes before the bell sounds for home room. It's either interrupt her laugh with the girl I don't know or wait and hope she breaks free. This is the kind of worrying I should have stopped doing by now. When I was 14 or 15, before I'd ever been on a date for Christ's sake, that kind of worrying was what every boy my age probably did. Now, at 17, I should be more assertive and less anxious about the consequences of asserting myself.

"Carpe diem," my dad says sometimes. "Seize the day."

So I march right over to Lesley and her friend, who gives me a "Who the hell are you?" frown, but I pay this no attention.

Before I can say anything, it starts to snow.

Lesley looks up at the gray sky and holds out an open palm to catch the flimsy wet flakes.

She smiles at me with those perfect white teeth. "Isn't this something?"

I wish I remembered those lines in the Times' "weather report" story. Would that charm her? It occurs to me in a fleeting moment that I could say something "suave" in response to her "Isn't this something?", such as "Yes, you are." I can't bring myself to be that phony. But I'd better hurry because the home room bell is instants away.

Then I realize that I can't ask her out for Valentine's Day or Valentine's Weekend because it's so late and either she's already got a date or it'll look like she's my last-second option. So instead I hold out my palm, catch my own snow and we laugh together, and as the home room bell sounds nothing feels phony.

Even in Scarsdale everyone seems to want this war to end. A horrible day today, I saw on the news after school, looking at the TV set over Mom's shoulder. An American SEAL team raided this Vietnam village and instead of killing Viet Cong soldiers they wiped out 14 innocent people. Kids, women, one of them pregnant, old men. "Collateral damage" some U.S. officer said on camera.

This Vietnam War has been going on as long as I can remember. In grade school the teachers told us we were keeping the world safe from communism. In high school they tell us we're winning so sooner or later it'll be over.

I don't know anybody over there, fighting. Then again, I didn't know any of the children or women or old men who died today either. When I think about it, I don't understand how killing somebody is going to accomplish anything but killing somebody.

Then there's this other thing. I'm afraid of the draft. Next year, when I turn 18, they can draft me. I don't want to dress up and kill someone else. I don't want to die. I don't want to die for my country or die for a cause or die to make my parents or my school proud of me or die just to die.

"Why are you watching this?" I ask my mom, who's sitting forward on the ottoman in front of the sofa, facing the television set. "Isn't it too much?"

"That's exactly right, Martin," she says, though I can barely hear her. "It is too much."

"So turn it off."

"Leave me alone for a while, OK, Martin?" This does not sound unkind – that's not Mom. I take her up on it. We're studying about heroes in American Government class and I sure as hell don't know what makes a hero anymore.

The Nightbird just announced that a multi-day music festival is being planned for late this summer in Wallkill. It sounds familiar. I check an atlas and see that it's about an hour and a half drive from here. She says the promoters dream of having all these major music acts there, including Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, maybe even The Beatles.

This is almost too good to be true. Something like this not far away from me. Mom and Dad won't let me go and they won't take me. It's kind of a dream and that's it.

I'm thinking about how this is the last year of the 1960s and that in a few months the calendar will be turning over to 1970. That sounds so strange to me. 1970? Strange as it is, to me it's really just another year, but Mom and Dad are acting like the '60s are this golden age of culture and music and self-awareness, that when it's over part of their lives are over. Of course they don't say that, but I know what's going on in their heads, believe me.

If there's a no-bullshit person on our street it's Mrs. McKay, who lives two doors down from us in this blue and yellow house that looks like something out of a fairytale. She's old – has to be in her 80s, I think – and she looks it. But she's out there in the mornings, on her porch or in the yard with her dog, a chocolate Labrador she's named Ollie. There's no one else in her life, I'm pretty sure. I never see sons or daughters or grandchildren or even friends over there. Just Mrs. McKay and Ollie.

We don't have a dog, but if we did I'd like one like Ollie. He's calm and gentle and for a big dog has a pretty benign bark. Sometimes he chases birds and squirrels in the yard, but he doesn't bark much at other dogs and never barks at people. When I walk by and see the two of them, his tail's wagging and Mrs. McKay, though she doesn't say much, nods toward me and once in a while I see something like a smile on her face.

Moms tells me that I should offer to help Mrs. McKay in her yard, even without her asking me, and I guess I'll do that this summer. I don't have a job and even though I don't think she'll pay me anything I may do it anyway. It might be chill to hang around her and the dog for a change. I like Ollie, and I think he likes me too.

But Dad says that Mrs. McKay isn't "all there," that she has senility or dementia or one or the other – or are those the same thing? Mom tells him to lay off when he talks like that, that Mrs. McKay wouldn't hurt anybody, and Dad says she might hurt herself the way she is right now.

I'm walking by their house this morning in March, a week before spring break, and she's in the front yard with a hose, watering a bed of daisies. Ollie, panting, is lying on the porch watching her.

"Good morning, Mrs. McKay!" I call out.

She half waves at me. The dog's tail goes crazy.

I missed out on Valentine's Day, but I'm not going to let spring break go down the drain. So I ask Lesley McAlister during lunch, when we have a private moment at the lockers, if she'd like to go to Scarsdale Falls and Tooley Bridge with me over the break one day. She asks me what we'd do there and I say just walk around and talk and … well, you know.

"Well you know" is code for "we'll see what happens" or code for "we're going to make out" or "I want to touch you" or "I want to kiss you" or "let's not worry about what we're going to do, let's just do it."

At first she says she has to see what her parents have planned for the break, but she must have read the disappointment in my eyes because a moment later she squeezed my hand and said "Yeah, Marty. Let's go to the Falls. I really want to."

We're standing in the middle of the Tooley Bridge and watching the falls furiously splashing into the stream below and carrying foam toward, under and past us. Across the bank we hear Canadian geese honking and when they've stopped, mourning doves high in the trees over our heads. It's said that there are Mandarin ducks around here, too, but we're not looking for them.

Lesley is wearing a bathing suit top and shorts and I'm in my cutoff jeans and Giants T-shirt and, we're the only ones on or near the bridge. We're close enough that I can smell the powder or perfume on Lesley's skin and hear beneath all the bird sounds the tinkle of the earrings she's wearing against her thick strands of shining chocolate-brown hair.

She's like chocolate and I want to indulge in her and taste her sweetness and not stop.

As I've said, she's a smart, deep girl and I'm not surprised when like out of nowhere she tells me she heard on the radio this morning about the man who assassinated Dr. King last year being sentenced to 99 years in jail.

"That's a death sentence, you know," she says.

"I guess it would be."

"I wish," she says, "that I'd seen and heard Dr. King in person. All he did was preach for love, Marty, and look what happened."

Maybe my motives aren't as noble as they should be at the moment, but I put my arm around her and squeeze her bare shoulder.

She starts to say something else. Her lips are parted to do that. I lean toward her and kiss her, not hard but firm. I feel for a second like I'm going to faint. Now her arms are around my neck and she's kissing me back and I don't want this to stop.

It does, though, and we're both out of breath and it's like her eyes are twice as big as before and I can't see anything except her.

"Lesley," I say, catching my breath, "will you …"

"Will I what?" She's breathless too. She grins. "Marry you?"

"Go to Wallkill with me."

"Wallkill? What's that?"

I explain it's this music festival this summer. I've heard already that Creedence Clearwater Revival has signed up to play there. Maybe the Stones will be there. Maybe the Beatles.

I have not translated my enthusiasm or excitement. She looks confused more than anything. Finally she says: "Marty? Will you kiss me again?"

I do, and we stop because of where we are and where we could go, and because maybe I love Lesley McAlister too much to hurt her.

"'Tis not in sunshine that friends are made, but when our skies are gray." Something The Nightbird said the other night.

I've got this like/not like friendship with Pete Wallace. He's into music like I am and neither one of us plays sports or belongs to clubs at school. We hang out and either listen to music or try to play it – me on the guitar I'm teaching myself and Pete with his harmonica. We make an awful racket much of the time, but it's a way to kill time.

I'm thinking of asking Pete if he wants to go to the music festival – now they're calling it Woodstock because it's moved, actually closer to me – but what if Lesley says yes? What if Gil wants to go along?

What if Mom and Dad don't let me?

I'm seeing Pete today, on Saturday, for the first time since school started up after the break. He can be a loner or just plain isolated. His parents argue a lot. He told me once that he thinks it gets physical too.

Makes my home life seem pretty OK.

We meet at my house and fold down beach chairs in the driveway in front of the open garage door. Pete's smoking a cigarette. We're just talking about nothing when suddenly he tells me he found his father's gun, on top of a bookshelf in the den.

"I'd never held a gun before," Pete says. "It was heavier than I'd figured. Colder in my hands, too. And it had an odor – like the way the model cars I used to build smelled about an hour after the glue holding them together had dried. Or the way my bedroom smelled whenever I woke up, in the dark, after a nightmare."

Pete's a too-thin kid with a pencil mustache and curly brown hair that never looks brushed or combed. Or washed either.

"How'd you find it in the first place?" I ask him.

He shrugs and his face says "None of your business" but he tells me: "I was just looking around."

On the top of a bookshelf? I think he knew the gun was there. The question is, what does he want to see it for?

I wonder to him whether the gun was loaded.

"No," he says. "Empty. I don't know where the bullets are."

"Why would you want to know?"

"Case my dad has ideas of shooting my mother. Or other way around."

"You think it's that bad?"

"Could be." He gets up, kicks something pebbly on the driveway and stares out at the street that runs alongside our house on Ardsley Road. "Some nights they sound like they're gonna kill each other."

I rise from my beach chair and stand beside him. We're both looking at the street now.

"Sorry to hear that, Pete."

He puts hands on hips and spits. "It's OK."

"You put the gun back, right?" I am hopeful.

Pete glares at me. "What do you think? I want to have my dad kick my ass?"

I know why Pete is so angry today and why he's angry much of the time, so why do I want to be his friend?

I get us sodas and we sit down again and I decide the best thing to do now is change the subject. I ask him about Woodstock. He says he's never heard of it. So I share what I've read and what I've heard The Nightbird say on the radio.

"This could be the biggest concert in history," I proclaim, sounding like a commercial.

The light comes into Pete's eyes and the frightening distance there before when he was talking about his father's gun has vacated.

"You think Paul Butterfield might be there?" he asks me.

The Chicago blues harmonica player is one of Pete Wallace's idols; maybe his only idol.

"Who knows?" I am only speculating, and humoring him. "They say 'everybody's' going to be there."

Pete is grinning. "Including us?"

I grin back.

Obviously, my parents are a big part of my life, probably the biggest because I wouldn't be here without them. But I think other than that it's all you need to know. They love me. They love me a lot because they had no other kids. Mom tells me she loves me. Dad sometimes does. Saying it isn't everything.

It's May and I've had six dates with Lesley and I want to say it to her. Say it because I mean it. Say it not because we're making it, and that's coming soon … any day now. But saying it then will be like obligation, like here's why I'm on top of you or you're on top of me. I want to say it when there's every chance that she will believe me.

I was 15 when the "Summer of Love" was happening in San Francisco and too much of a kid to make much sense out of it. I remember Dad complaining about the hippies and Mom saying she was scared of all the drugs and then she looked at me significantly.

It wasn't until today, when I'm thinking about love and about to see Lesley for the seventh time after dark, that I hear The Nightbird play something from "Surrealistic Pillow," the Jefferson Airplane record released two years ago, four months before the "Summer of Love."

I lie on my bed in the dark after she introduces this song, "Comin' Back to Me." I listen to the acoustic guitar and the echoey flute and the words (and I think of Lesley and whoever, if anyone, will come after her):

"You came to stay and live my way

Scatter my love like leaves in the wind

You always say you won't go away

But I know what it always has been ..."

I fall asleep and I dream that Lesley's standing in this field in a long white dress, her hair tied atop her head with a flower and her hands cupped together as she looks down. There's an explosion in back of her; black turns orange. My love. My Lai.

I'm sweating and I don't know what time it is and I can't find the lamp switch. A dog's barking its head off outside. I must have been yelling out because Mom is in the room.

"Marty? Honey, are you all right?"

I feel her arms around me and the light goes on. She's still in her nurse's uniform, and in the middle of the night like this it's kind of like seeing an angel coming out of the darkness.

Something tells me that if I try to explain to her what I think I just dreamed I'll end up crying, and I haven't cried in front of my mother since I can remember when.

"Did you have a bad dream?" she asks me.

I feel like I'm too old to be coddled but not too old to be comforted. "Yeah," I say and my head falls against her shoulder.

Dad is watching television, unusual for him in the morning, when I come down to leave for school. I can hear but not see what's on:

"One man is dead after riot police, employing tear gas, fought back anti-war protesters at the University of California Berkeley. This after Governor Ronald Reagan declared a state of martial law. The so-called People's Park is now under National Guard restriction."

Momentum keeps building toward ending this war in Southeast Asia, but the year is half over almost and here we are.

Dad is shaking his head and cursing something under his breath. I don't know whether he's disgusted with the riot police, with the protesters, with Ronald Reagan, with the war, or what. After last night's bad dream I don't want to ask him.

Lesley isn't at school and I drag through the day. Gil and I go off campus for lunch, to a convenience store that sells sandwiches you can heat up. We see Pete Wallace in the parking lot; he says he didn't bother going to school at all. What was wrong with us?

"My father sat me down and talked at me for an hour last night," Gil is telling me as we walk back to the campus. We're both kicking rocks ahead of us, like when we were kids.

"What about?"

"About my future. What I'm going to be."

"Be? You mean a career?"

"That's right."

I pull up. "I thought you were going to study architecture. You're always carrying around that T-square in your book bag."

"He gave me that T-square, Marty, and he wants me to study architecture. I don't know what I am going to 'be.' Just so long as it isn't a soldier."

We've talked about the draft before. It's a looming subject that we try to avoid, but here it is.

"What about you, Marty? Has your dad had that conversation with you?"

I shake my head and gesture that we be on our way again. Bad enough that we left campus at lunch without permission; it wouldn't make things better to be late getting back on top of that.

"I don't want to be anything, Gil," I finally admit.

"You know how that sounds?" There is incredulity in his reply. "Like you're going to just be a bum or something."

"A bum?"

"Yeah."

I laugh. "You don't understand."

"No. I guess I don't."

"Then I'll explain it to you someday, buddy."

Maybe I will. When I've figured out exactly what I'm going to explain.

This is going to be my second time. The first, about a year ago, was in the back seat of my car and it went about as "well" as it could go in the back seat of a Ford Falcon. I never see the girl, Ren Barrow, anymore because she and her family moved to Poughkeepsie, thank God. I remember that the day after I was asking Pete if it counted because I never got all the way inside. "If what happened happened like you say," he told me, acting like he knew what he was talking about, "then it counted."

Nothing like the back seat of a car now. My parents aren't here and Lesley is and we've been making out on the sofa for what seems like an hour. I just realized that her sweater's pulled up over her head and my pants are open and we're going somewhere we can't turn back from.

I don't feel like a creep, though. Lesley is so warm and her fingers pressing my back send these shivers up and down. I want to say something before we … but I don't know what to say. She tells me to relax, like she's a wiser, more experienced older woman, but the truth is she's only three months older than I am. She's right just the same.

"Just hold me," she says.

It's the last thing I hear before we become part of each other.

The Nightbird is playing this new song on the radio, one that John Lennon and Yoko Ono recorded during their "bed-in" in Canada.

"All we are saying is give peace a chance" is the choral refrain. It repeats over and over, like the end of "Hey Jude," but this is better. It's singing out to the whole world. I listen in my bedroom and think about what Lesley McAlister said about Dr. King: "All he did was preach for love, Marty, and look what happened."

I hope John Lennon survives.

It's the end-of-the-school-year assembly – mandatory, by the way – and Principal Otto is talking about the mission that Apollo 10 just completed. This was a dry run, he tells us, with the lunar module, named Snoopy, separating from the mother ship, named Charlie Brown, and descending close to the lunar surface. The next mission, Apollo 11 in July, will be "the one," Otto says and there's a catch in his throat. "We all will witness history when man sets foot on the moon."

Only now am I getting this. I've been looking through my telescope since I was 7 years old and a lot of nights the only thing close enough in the sky to see was the moon. But I kept trying to see beyond the moon – stars that are light years away; planets when they're close enough to come into distant focus, whether it's Mars (usually) or Venus (sometimes). Once, when Mom and Dad took us to the mountains for summer vacation, the sky was so clear and not polluted by lights that I actually saw a tiny but clear image of Saturn, rings and all. The most memorable sighting I ever had with my scope.

It never occurred to me that we might one day step onto the surface of the moon. I know, from history class, that President Kennedy said it was an American goal. And when the Apollo program began soon after that grownups around me talked about it like "someday, one day" it will happen.

I see how emotional the principal's getting about this. I look around at my classmates and kids from other classes at school and they look bored. It's a hot day, the gym is stuffy, smelling of sweat and rubber left on the floor by worn-out sneakers, and everybody just wants to get the hell out of here and start vacation.

I could be the only one who, in the seconds that go by, feels as emotional about this as Otto does. Imagine putting your foot down on something besides Earth.

Wonder where I'll be when it happens. Because I am getting emotional I think of Lesley and hope that she'll be with me.

Probably not. Mom and Dad will have us gather around the TV set. I should be happier about the prospect of being with them on such an important day in human history.

Driving home with Gil, we talk about whether we'd want to go to the moon, whether we'd be brave enough to cram into a space capsule and blast off from Earth, not knowing if we'd survive in the long run. Gil says he gets car sick enough times that the idea of shooting into space and being weightless and upside down much of the time makes it "highly unlikely" that he'd be a volunteer.

Me, I don't like the idea of being in a space ship that much, but being on the moon? That turns me on. Feeling what it's like under my feet. Staring out at the blackness. I figure if we can look up at the moon from here, if you were on the moon you could look up and see the Earth. I've got a magazine in my bedroom that has the "Earthrise" photo of the moon as seen from space by the crew of Apollo 8. "The blue marble," one of the astronauts said it looked like. I'd be standing on the moon – or floating just above the surface since

there's no air – and the Earth would be up in the sky with everyone I care about somewhere on it. Somewhere down deep inside all that blue.

When the assembly ends, the applause for the principal, who left us with a hearty "Have a glorious and thoughtful summer vacation," is lukewarm. Especially compared to the temp in the gym.

Thoughtful? What did he think we've been doing all school year long?

Tonight I heard the Nightbird say: *"Come on. Say I love you to someone. It feels good."*

Mom and Dad are still up. I can hear them talking downstairs. How about I go down there to say good night and add an "I love you both"? No, they'd know I was doing it on a dare or some self-improvement assignment given at school. Sure, they know I love them, but I don't say it. I don't say it when they tell me they love me either.

Why are the words so difficult to say? Really?

I've said it once to Lesley … after she said it to me. But what's weird is that I think since we said this to each other, things haven't been the same between us. Is it because we expect to exchange those words every time we're together? Is it because we didn't truly mean it at the time? Or has the love changed, if it was love at all?

I'm full of questions. That's expected when you're my age. Answers? Not so expected. They take time, like Mom says. I've had more questions this year than all the other years of my life put together.

The "Summer of '69." Somebody on WNEW-FM called it that last night. The guy didn't say what that meant, whether it was another "Summer of Love" or something. I'm working at a consignment store not far from home. I move furniture on and off trucks, break down boxes, haul out the garbage, sometimes make deliveries with another guy in a panel truck. It's not a living … it's a job.

"Keeps you out of trouble," my father says.

The rest of the time I help Mrs. McKay out a little. Ollie follows me around during all my chores. I think he's my best friend of the summer.

I'm lonely. Lesley and her family flew west to Oregon for some fishing and camping summer. Pete's got a job at a service station, where he's already made the owner mad enough to fire him. The owner is his dad's best friend, though, so he may survive until September.

Gil's around, but we still haven't decided if we like hanging out other than going to and from school.

This is when my dad gets all over me about how if I'd joined a club or played a sport my junior year, neither of which I wanted to do, I'd have made more friends and wouldn't be hanging around at home when not working. It could be worse, I want to tell him – I could be hanging around at home and not working.

I haven't said anything to them, Mom or Dad, about wanting to go to Woodstock in August. I still want to go.

In between working and listening to the Nightbird and looking through my telescope in the back yard, I taught myself P.F. Sloan's "Eve of Destruction" on guitar, and by the end of June I knew all the chords, all the changes, and I was trying to sound like Barry McGuire growling it out:

"The Eastern world, it is explodin'

Violence flarin', bullets loadin'

You're old enough to kill but not for votin'

You don't believe in war, but what's that gun your totin'?

And even the Jordan River has bodies 'floatin'

But you tell me, over and over and over again, my friend

How you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction ..."

This was not a popular choice in my house. Anti-Vietnam War as both Mom and Dad are, they made it plain in words and in annoyed glances that

they prefer I learn "If I Were A Carpenter" or "Scarborough Fair" or "500 Miles ..." anything but a song as angry and ironical as "Eve of Destruction."

I realize that the back yard is a bad place to search the skies, what with all the suburban lights, but it's all right for moon gazing. As we get closer to the launch of Apollo 11 I've been focusing on the moon, this shiny white orb that like I said I kind of ignored with all the more elusive objects further away in space.

The nearer to the launch, on July 16, the more I try to chase this anxiety that the mission to land on the moon will fail, that there will be a technical glitch before the LEM tries to land, or, more worrying, that something will go wrong before the astronauts even approach. Like Apollo 1 a couple of years ago.

Dad's been outside at the telescope with me a couple of times. Bonding? Closest we get to it. He says not to worry, that NASA's been preparing for this so long that every possible contingency is anticipated. He wants me to think about the "gravity" (was he trying to be funny?) of the mission. A monumental day in humankind.

With Lesley gone for the summer and work a drudge and senior year – supposedly also "monumental" – not far away, I need a distraction and Apollo 11 is a good one.

We don't go to church very often, but I think I'll say a prayer – might even get down on my knees at my bed -- the night before the ship lifts off.

Good day, bad day. First the good. Three days after July 4th, something to celebrate about America: U.S. troops start to leave Saigon in South Vietnam. It will be happy for me, my mom and my dad to see live people returning on some airport tarmac instead of caskets covered with the American flag.

Now the not so good, and in the scheme of things I know it's nowhere near as important. But I talked on the phone to Lesley and it was like "Hi,

how are you?" "Fine, how are you?" Not much more than that. I don't know what else to say about this.

Mom's shift at the hospital was over and Dad came home early from the office to be there, around the television set. My boss let me leave at lunchtime from work, too, so that I could watch the moon landing with my parents, as I always suspected I would.

Mom and Dad are together on the couch, sitting forward and whispering. I am on the floor, cross-legged and I say nothing, just watch with something fluttering around inside me when, about quarter after 4 from 240,000 miles away Neil Armstrong tells Houston "The Eagle has landed."

I see the technicians in the control room cheering. I see my parents hug each other on the couch. I wonder if I'll be thinking of this moment 10 years from now ... 20 years from now ... or even in a few months when the decade turns over.

It feels like forever that Armstrong and Aldrin are sitting there inside the LEM on the surface of the moon. I don't know what else there is to watch at this point. Mom's making dinner and Dad's on the phone in the den. They tell us on TV that it'll be maybe 11 o'clock tonight when they start to walk on the moon.

So for now I sit in my room with the window where my desk is open and the warm summer night air is coming through. Through the overhanging oak tree branches I look out on the street. Empty. Everyone's inside at the TV set. I can see across the street in the three houses there lights flickering and in all of them, the white oscillating flashes that come from a set that's on. It's like the country's stopped. Holding its collective breath? No, the astronauts are on the moon. Why shouldn't they be safe when they open the door and step out?

I figure that I will not leave a mark behind like these men are going to leave. I'll be here and do the best I can and try to be happy and, well, that'll

have to be enough. It's not even fair to compare my life to theirs. They're heroes, now and forever.

I'm a 17-going-on-18 someone who doesn't know his future or his destination. I don't want to know. Not yet.

"The surface is very, very fine grained when you get close to it. It's almost like a powder. I'm going to step off the LEM now.

"That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."

Mission accomplished. Dream realized. Goal achieved. My parents are applauding on the couch. Dad slaps me on the shoulder. Mom leans in and kisses me on the cheek.

Armstrong must have thought about what he'd say for a long time, I imagine. Now I don't know what to say. But I'm excited and it isn't so bad being here, at this moment, with my parents who gave me life in the first place.

The Woodstock lineup is coming together and it's truly far out. The Who. Janis Joplin. Jimi Hendrix. Creedence. Joe Cocker. Jefferson Airplane. Santana.

Paul Butterfield's on the bill and I call Pete Wallace.

"We've gotta be there," he says emphatically.

Gil Livingstone, who nowadays says he wants to be called "Gil Liv," phones me. He wants to go to Woodstock but thinks there's no way in hell his parents will permit it.

Lesley McAlister is back too, from Oregon, and we haven't spoken. But in my fantasies I envision me, Lesley, Pete and Gil Liv driving upstate together to experience the never-to-be-forgotten. What a way to end the 1960s.

Unsurprisingly, my mother and father just about hit the roof when I float the idea of driving up to the Woodstock festival "with a couple of the guys," I phrase it. It isn't just the thought of an overnight road trip unsupervised;

Mom has been paying attention to the talk going around even in Scarsdale about how drugs and booze are going to be everywhere at the festival and that young people might be walking around naked to boot.

It isn't until the 12th – and the festival is supposed to begin on Friday the 15th – that a plan to steal away without permission surfaces. Pete Wallace, naturally the most rebellious of any of us, hatches it. He can drive, he says, and there's no one waiting for him at home, so all I have to do is meet him somewhere outside ahead of time, hop in and off we'll go.

I envision being on the road, less than a few miles out of town, and having my parents speed up behind us, horn honking frantically; or a New York State Police car, siren blaring, tailgating us into pulling over.

"You're just afraid of your parents," Pete snarls at me when I describe these scenarios. "All right. Miss your chance of a lifetime. It's not like there's going to be a Woodstock Festival once you've turned 18."

I know it's more than fear of my parents at work here. I admit more than a little anxiety of my own about driving off like fugitives in quest of the ultimate hippy high.

I hear The Nightbird talking about Woodstock on her show, making it sound like a spiritual happening and not a depraved weekend. A spiritual happening this close to me and I am going to miss it?

Dreamed last night that I was headed to Woodstock not in a car at all but on a magic carpet. Sitting in front of me, my arms around her waist, was Lesley. Her hair had grown about three inches since spring and it was flying backward into my face with the whooshing wind of the propelled magic carpet; the skin on the back of her neck smelled like patchouli; her right cheek was painted with a blooming purple flower and the mascara under her eyes made her look like this fantastical enchanter.

I dropped acid once last year with my cousins from New Jersey who were visiting us over the Thanksgiving holiday; discovered I had no attraction to tripping. I enjoyed the very first effects of the LSD but sooner than

for either of my cousins that turned to paranoia and a hallucination that I was plummeting down this endless black hole.

When I came down from the drug I was of a mind to be straight the rest of my life. Of course that hasn't happened but these days I don't do much, alone or with anyone else. Pete thinks I'm afraid. He's always thinking I'm afraid, come to say.

Do I have to sneak off to Woodstock to prove something to him? Or to myself?

I call Lesley and act like we're making the trip and ask whether she wants to go along. When she says "Are you crazy?" I know that something inside her for me has changed. Something inside me for her has broken down. She says she'll see me "next month" at school.

To hell with it. I'm going to Woodstock.

I leave a note for my parents early that morning, before they are up:

"Mom and Dad: I'm on my way to the Woodstock festival with Pete. I know you told me I couldn't go, but I have to. There may never be anything like this again and I want to be part of it. Promise I'll phone you the minute we get there and we'll be careful. I have my sleeping bag, a change of clothes and water. Anything else we need we'll get there, I'm sure."

Of course we're about a third of the way there now, it's light out, and rather than thinking about all the great musicians we're going to see, I'm imagining what it's like at my house. Mom and Dad have read the note, they're angry and trying to decide what to do, if anything, to head us off. Mom is very upset, maybe crying. Dad's calling me every name in the book.

At the wheel, Pete isn't demonstrating any anxiety at all. He's jabbering on about Paul Butterfield and how he's worn out his copy of "The Resurrection of Pigboy Crabshaw" and how this musician or that musician who plays blues harp isn't in Butterfield's fuckin' league.

We've got the radio on and there's only AM in this car, and the further we get from Scarsdale the more we hear about traffic on the interstate "apparently headed for this music festival on a farm near Bethel."

"Don't worry about it," Pete scoffs, changing lanes repeatedly if not impatiently. "The music doesn't start until 5 they say."

"Who says?"

"The festival people. I read about it this morning." He frowns at me. "What's the matter with you, Marty? Why so pissy?"

"I'm not pissy."

"You still feeling guilty about walking out on Mommy and Daddy?"

I don't appreciate the tone or the condescension of that at all and tell him so. Next thing I know we're hollering at each other.

Next thing I know after that he's telling me he's got his dad's gun in the glove compartment.

Next thing I know after that I'm out of his car and hitching a ride back to Scarsdale. God damn it all. And double god damn it all.

Got a ride back in a fruit truck and as I lie there on the hard aluminum bed surrounded by crates of apples, peaches and persimmons I curse Pete Wallace, I curse myself and I bawl half of the way back to Scarsdale.

So I got grounded for the rest of the summer, which was only three and a half weeks before my senior year of high school began. Before I got grounded, my father threatened "I'm going to kick your ass!" when I returned from the ill-fated Woodstock adventure – on foot and carrying with me in a knapsack the few things I brought with me. Mom was relieved that I was home and hadn't gone after all, but she slapped my face once.

I didn't tell them why I came back; certainly nothing about fighting with Pete and finding out he had a gun in the car. I just said the car had trou-

ble, he wanted to go on and I decided to come back. Didn't make them feel much better.

"Shittiest, most disrespectful thing you've ever done," Dad bellowed, and Mom chimed in that I wasn't ready to grow up, as one about to graduate high school should've been ready.

"Come. Fly with me. Alison Steele, the Nightbird. On WNEW till dawn."

The show ends at 2 a.m. like it always does and I've stayed up listening while the rest of the house is quiet. Everything I learn about Woodstock and what happened there I learned from the Nightbird: the bands, the songs, the masses, the mud. She wasn't there but she says she could see it all the way from her darkened studio. That's how I will have to have seen it, but from my bedroom.

I don't know what happened with Pete up there – if he made it or if he got busted for having the gun or for anything else. I am not reaching out to him and he hasn't reached out to me. Gil wants to know all the details, but I give him the same story I gave Mom and Dad. Does he believe me? Likely not.

Somebody at school had a film – I don't know where they got it – of Hendrix playing "The Star Spangled Banner" on his ax the morning that the festival ended. It killed me to know I missed it in person. You know how they say certain things in life age you? This thing in my life made me younger, made me feel like a kid, like a baby.

I see Lesley at school, almost every day. We wave and sometimes we say hello or a little more. She's not in any of my classes and we haven't had a date all fall semester long. I think about her sometimes in a class when I'm daydreaming

and I see her with that purple flower on her face – which wasn't really there at all. Must mean something.

I don't know whether I'm trying to make up to my parents for having deceived them during the summer, but I'm studying hard and getting good marks this term. My counselor, Mr. Cremin, says I am "blossoming."

"And now's the time to do it," he winked at me. "College apps."

My parents assume – I think I do too – that I'll enroll at SUNY Westchester next year, spend two years trying to figure it out, whatever "it" is, then transfer somewhere. Maybe NYU if I can get in. I think I'd like to study film. Mentioned the idea once to Dad and he said it was a "dead-end major." Everybody else I told encouraged me, even Mom.

I think the nights listening to Alison until 2 a.m. has taught me how to see things, to visualize, to approach life cinematically. That and watching "Blow-up" over the summer. I wasn't allowed to watch it when it came out three years ago, but it was showing at the art house and I went with Pete (pre-Woodstock) and I still think about it a lot. I don't know if I could ever create a film like that. Somebody has to try.

Looking through a camera lens and looking through a telescope shouldn't be that different. Right?

Making a movie, I can escape. That feels like what it's all about now.

I don't look at the news on TV over my father's shoulder anymore. Part of me doesn't want to know what's going on. The war. The moon. Woodstock. The countdown to the new decade. Leave it all behind.

I'm on a date right before Halloween with Mary Ordway, who's generally believed to be the smartest girl in the senior class. She might be, because I don't feel anywhere near as smart when we're talking unless it's about music or movies. Mary journals and writes poetry and dreams, she says, of going to Cornell and majoring in philosophy there.

I kiss her later in the evening and she tastes like salt and sugar at once, and close up her eyes get this golden hue to them, like jewels.

But when the night's over and we're parting in front of her house a mile or so from mine, she cracks open her car door, says a quick "Bye" and is out. I think she's looking for a guy who can quote somebody other than The Nightbird on WNEW.

If Mary inspired me at all, however, in just one date, it was to give writing a try. I become prolific, if not especially impressive, in my English class. My teacher, Miss Simpson, notices enough to ask me to write a capstone essay instead of taking the final exam in December, an option she says she's giving her "best writers."

"I'm one of the best?"

She nods. The topic, she tells me, is reflecting on the transition from the 1960s to 1970 and a new decade.

I start thinking about it, but it isn't until after Thanksgiving, with the deadline only two weeks away, that I begin to noodle with the topic on paper. I leave my parents out of it. I've been entrusted to write this myself based on my own growth in self-expression. That's how Miss Simpson put it.

I've started listening to Rosko on WNEW now, in addition to The Nightbird. First time I've heard a Black man on the radio who wasn't part of the news being made or reported.

It's December and he interrupts the records he's playing to read a column by this guy named Pete Hamill about the war. About how three American soldiers in particular won't be home this Christmas because they were killed "in the swamps of Vietnam." Our allies in Southeast Asia, the column reads, are "a collection of thugs and totalitarians" for whom our young men are fighting this illegal war, and dying in it.

I tell Mom and Dad about the column the next day and ask if they can get me a copy to share in school. Dad says he'll work on it. Mom doesn't say anything. She doesn't seem right to me. She's swallowing a lot and wringing her fingers. I ask what's wrong.

To my surprise, she smiles and when she laughs it's one of those half-laugh, half-sob laughs that you don't hear very often.

"Marty," she says, taking my hand with her right and clutching Dad's with her left. "I'm going to have a baby. You're going to have a brother or sister."

Dad kisses her hard and I let go of her hand and lean back in my kitchen chair to the point where it might fall over, but it doesn't.

"Isn't this wonderful?" Mom asks, and her eyes are blinking a lot and glistening.

I can hardly believe it. Mom is happy, Dad seems happy, so I must be. We do this three-way hug in the dull light of the overhead kitchen fixture.

I don't say anything about this startling family development to Gil on the drive to school that morning. Besides, he's chattering about his folks' Christmas vacation plans for the Livingstone household in the Catskills.

"Snow and everything," says Gil Liv with unbridled enthusiasm.

But at lunch later in the day, after I carry my cafeteria tray onto the patio – biting December Scarsdale wind be damned – I see one table still inside, by the glass door, where Lesley McAllister is sitting alone.

We haven't spoken much at all, but for some reason she's the one person I want to tell about this.

She looks so goddamned pretty when I step inside again with my tray and stand beside her table. The sweep of her hair across her forehead, the curve of her uneasy smile when she looks up at me, the mirror of memories in her eyes. She's expecting me to say something and when I don't she nods. "You want to sit down, Marty?"

I do without speaking, set my tray on the table across from hers. We are straining, I can tell, to not do the "how-are-you/how've-been" thing and yet I know certain specific subjects are implicitly verboten: Woodstock. Dating. Christmas vacation. Us.

So I just tell her: "My mother's pregnant. She told me this morning."

Her lips part and she sucks in a breath. "Your mother's going to have a baby? Is she sure?"

"Sure as sure can be." I sound more glib than I mean to be. Then I slowly shake my head. "I don't know how to feel about it, Lesley."

"Feel?" She reaches across the table and covers my hand with hers. "You should feel great for her. It's great for all of you."

"Really?"

"Yes, of course." She looks around, then lowers her voice. "It's a happy thing, Marty. New life."

I'd forgotten how Lesley McAlister's touch felt and how she has the remarkable ability to make everything seem positive and possible.

I clear my throat. "I'm uh, sorry, you know. About how I've ignored you."

"You haven't, Marty," she says, but her hand leaves mine. "We're friends. It's new for us but there's nothing wrong with it."

This is far too public a setting, even at a table removed from most of the others in the school cafeteria, to share any kind of intimate conversation. Too public for me to even whisper to Lesley that making love with her was something I will never forget and never get over at the same time. Too public to take her in my arms and hold her until the end-of-lunch bell rings and maybe even after that.

"You're special to me," she says as she rises from the table. Then her lower lip trembles, she hurries a smile and touches my face with her right hand. "I've got to get ready for study hall."

"Sure."

She picks up her tray. "Merry Christmas, Marty."

"Merry Christmas, love," I say back, still seated. I mean this.

I watch her mingle through the other students in the thick of cafeteria traffic. Now I've got this table just to myself. Who wants it?

The news on WNEW late that night is that at a Rolling Stones concert at a speedway in Northern California, four people died, including a man who was stabbed to death. "This was not," the announcer intoned, "Woodstock West."

I turn off the radio right in the middle of The Nightbird's introduction of a song, click off the lamp beside my bed and turn over on my stomach, my face in a pillow.

Miss Simpson, standing behind her desk holding the final draft of my capstone essay, removes her glasses and sets it down now that she's finished reading.

"A very fine effort, Martin," she tells me and I'm thinking the smile and the assessment are sincere. "You have not disappointed me."

"Hope not," I say, feeling sheepish.

She takes up the paper again. "It's candid and contemplative. A little ragged in places, but that's fine. I wanted the integrity of your voice and your thoughts. You've achieved that."

"Thanks, ma'am."

She holds the bottom of the second page closer to her face. "Your ending," she says, "was a little surprising to me. But I think I understand it now in the context of the whole essay."

"The ending?"

"Yes." She hands the paper to me. "Would you read it, please?"

"The ending?"

"Yes. The paragraph. Read it out loud."

I remember it well enough to recite it without reading it, but I do so, just for her:

"As I stand here," I read, "on the threshold of a new year and a new decade, I look around me at what's old, at what's new and at what lingers, and I think: What a world! What a beautiful, terrible world!"

The Case of the Love Love Lovers

The Redondo Beach Police Department lieutenant, dead-tired, roused from doze-watching a Dodgers ballgame at home and already one sheet to the wind, tugged at his hastily re-tied tie, snorted and glowered at the sallow faced, expectant junior detective standing two feet from him with a notepad in one hand and a ready pencil in the other. "Victim ID?"

"Raymond Scarry," the young detective offered in a staccato, uncertain reply. "Not sure if it's Scare-y or Scar-y."

"Hmmrph." The lieutenant, whose name was Bando, stepped inside the dank second-floor Room 12 in the Surfsider Motor Inn. He'd been in enough crime-scene motel rooms late or in the middle of the night over the years to recognize the stench of death. "Where is he?"

"This way, Lieutenant," the compliant detective obliged, stepping over yellow police tape that had a few minutes earlier been strung cross the doorway. He noted, as the lieutenant followed him, the lingering presence of the balding hotel manager, a harried Mr. Laidlaw, outside the doorway. He'd wanted to know what to tell the other motel guests who'd gathered upstairs and down, some in nightclothes, some standing on the stairs. So far Mr. Laidlaw had been ignored.

Bando oriented his eyes in the poorly lit motel room. Didn't they furnish these rooms with decent lamps?

It didn't take long to find the body – a salt-and-pepper haired man of 40 or so with a stubble of uneven beard that belied nice clothes of the type executives usually wore. Pressed slacks, dress shirt, necktie … bullet hole.

The lieutenant bent down and then sank to one knee beside what once was Raymond Scarry (Scare-y or Scar-y), sprawled on the floor on his back in between the cheap coffee table and a television set built into a cheap credenza.

"We didn't find a gun," stammered the junior detective over his shoulder. "At least not yet."

"We?"

"Sergeant Pauley's in the bathroom dusting for prints."

Though there was no question that this man was dead, shot practically through the heart – close and clean – Bando pressed his right hand to the victim's neck. Not clammy cold yet. Not dead that long.

"Shit," he said.

She leaned across the desk and picked up the retro landline phone, cherry red like the polish over her contoured, manicured nails.

"Dana Vape," she said, businesslike.

A gravelly voice responded: "You the P.I.?"

She tossed her tresses of thick auburn hair over one shoulder as she fell back into the swivel chair, phone receiver in hand. "Yeah. That's me. Who is this? What can I do for you?"

He identified himself as Detective Lieutenant Vic Bando from Redondo Beach. Then: "I'm calling about a Mr. Scarry. Raymond Scarry."

Dana Vape, five years ago and for two soulless years after that Mrs. Raymond Scarry, sat upright in her swivel chair. The police didn't begin

a phone call with "I'm calling about so-and-so" unless grim news was forthcoming.

"Jesus," she said. "What's happened to Raymond?"

Bando told her as much as he knew, which wasn't that much, then requested that she come down to the station on Diamond Street as soon as she could get there.

The driver's side power window was broken, making the 19-mile drive from Santa Monica to Redondo Beach noisy and noxious. She drove as a result with a leftover COVID mask over her face and with the MP3 player blasting a Springsteen ballad. *"One minute you're here, next minute you're gone* ..." She could barely make out the lyrics, though she knew the "Badlands" album pretty well from the classic-rock radio she listened to. This song fit the moment.

So Raymond was dead. But shot to death? Murdered? Who the hell would have a motive to kill him? Maybe the cops in Redondo Beach thought *she* had one, that she'd pulled the trigger the night before at this Surf-something motel.

She changed lanes to avoid a careening motorcycle, slid in behind a Jeep Cherokee that was traveling at the speed limit.

No, she'd stopped loving Raymond practically from the moment they'd exchanged vows in Vegas. Vows they shouldn't have exchanged in the first place. She'd stopped loving him, yes, but she hadn't started hating him. They just shouldn't have been together in the first place.

When she realized that she couldn't remember exactly the last time she'd spoken to him, she choked up a bit for the first time since she'd taken the call at her office.

The Jeep in front of her slowed and its brake lights illuminated red. The inevitable slowdown preceding a stoppage along the 405. Nothing she could do about traffic, Mr. Redondo Beach policeman.

She remembered that Raymond had remarried about a year ago, news she'd been given by a mutual friend who was still mutual with them both. What was the new wife's name? She'd probably never known. Was she going to be at the station too? Or was she on the lam? Could *this* Mrs. Raymond Scarry have done it?

There'd been no begrudging him a relatively quick follow-up marriage. Raymond's parents had long since passed; his only sibling, a brother in Jersey, had been estranged from him for decades. He deserved to not be alone.

She was good with alone, comfortable in her own self-assured skin. You didn't do what she did for a living unless you were. The insane, unpredictable hours of her work made for lousy relationships and pretty lousy friendships too.

Anyway, who the hell did this? Who the hell would?

Off went the radio. Her mind flitted, through traffic, first to the case she was on at the moment – the recovery of a rightful heir's legacy from a disreputable party; then to one from years ago, not long after she'd obtained her private investigators license. A case at a motel, not in Redondo Beach, but in Venice. She'd thought it a crank at first: A client, who worked the night-shift desk at a Travelodge there, claimed that Sleepy Bear was wandering the premises after dark, knocking things over and doing other forms of benign but costly mischief.

"Sleepy Bear?" she'd retorted at the time. "The motel chain's mascot?" She'd pictured the sleepy-eyed cartoon character in his nightshirt and night-cap. "Are you deliberately trying to waste my time, buster?"

But the clerk had been in earnest, and he had cash to pay her for looking into reports of sightings from motel guests and his own found evidence of planters smashed, room-door paint scratched and outdoor decorative bric-a-brac destroyed.

It had taken her only a couple of nights stalking the motel grounds to uncover the actual perp, or perps: two neighborhood teenagers without conscience who got off on vandalism. As to the "sightings" of Sleepy Bear, those she'd attributed to the wild imagination or drunkenness or mass hysteria of the motel guests who'd reported them. In any event, she got her 400 bucks and the satisfaction of telling her own client not to believe everything he heard.

Sleepy the frigging Bear.

She spotted the Inglewood Avenue cutoff, maneuvered her car two lanes to the right and took the offramp barely ahead of a speeding gray Amazon truck, which tooted at her in so doing.

Raymond had been what? Forty one? Forty two? She'd sent him an e-card the day he'd turned 40, a celebrity knockoff with "Dolly Parton" twanging "Happy Birthday." Her email menu showed her later that he'd picked up and viewed the card, but she'd never heard from him otherwise. She'd only turned 40 herself a month earlier and she knew how that number messed with the ego and the psyche, at least for some. In truth, Raymond was more preoccupied with clinging to younger days than she was. He went religiously, even ridiculously often, to the gym. Touched up the gray of his temples himself. Was known to cover the date of his birth with an index finger whenever anyone perused his driver's license.

One thing was for sure – he didn't want to get old.

Turned out he wouldn't.

The Lieutenant Bando who welcomed her perfunctorily into a messy squad room office made it clear in terseness and detachment that he had little respect for private investigators, and especially one who happened to be a woman. He regarded her through small blue eyes with disdain, and in waving

her toward a chair in front of his scratched-up desk cleared his throat loudly as if trying to loosen something he'd swallowed accidentally.

"Mizz Vape," he said, extending the *zzz's* like a buzzing bee or a man openly resentful about not being able to call a single woman "Miss." He took up a manila folder holding official-looking papers. "When was the last time you saw your ex-husband?"

She crossed her legs. "Saw him or spoke to him?"

"Saw. I'm not talking about a phone call."

"Well," she replied, "I saw him across the room at a restaurant in Beverly Hills about three months ago. He looked like he was having lunch with some business associates. But we didn't speak."

"That's it?"

"Well, I suppose the last time I saw him *and* we spoke was about a year ago. I had some papers of his. Turned out he needed them."

Bando, who'd been standing over his desk the while, plopped down into the chair with a loud squeak. "What kind of papers?"

"Escrow papers from the home we had on Montana Avenue. He wanted them for his tax person."

Bando was bored with rather than suspicious of her – that much was obvious from a very dramatic yawn that followed her recollection. He picked up a pair of cheap-looking glasses from the top of his desk and fitted them over his bony nose. "Any idea who might want to have harmed your husband?"

"Ex-husband."

"Yeah. Ex."

She didn't hesitate. "No. I'm not aware of any enemies Raymond ever made."

"Seems like whoever shot him knew him."

"How do you know it was someone who knew him?"

"Door to the motel room was unlocked," Bando retorted. "He was shot at close range too."

"That's no proof that he knew the man."

"Or woman."

Vape deflected the insinuation. "Or woman. Since when is a motel room door unlocked? They're made to lock automatically when you close them."

"That's my point," Bando said, emerging from his desk chair. "Door's only unlocked if somebody unlocks it from the inside, maybe goes out and expects to come right back."

Vape shook her head as if drying wet hair, a gesture more melodramatic than she intended, but this lieutenant's "logic," void as it was of any imagination, was infuriating. "The real question here is," she said, "what was Raymond doing in a motel room in Redondo Beach in the first place? He lives in the Palisades." She marched across the room to an undistinguished but given the late hour tempting coffee machine, touched the decanter, found it cold, and thought better of it. "How did he register there?"

"In his own name," Bando stared at her.

"Did he say how long he was staying?"

The lieutenant consulted the paper on his desk, glared down at them. "Just the one night."

She sighed. "It doesn't make sense."

"Thanks," Bando said, with intended sarcasm, "for the tip."

"All right, Lieutenant," she said, returning to the seat she'd first taken upon arrival. "You didn't call me down here to review with me the facts as you have them, right? You want me to tell you my own whereabouts at the time of the killing."

"Yeah," he said, resenting her in his mind taking control of the interview. "'Specially since you're not that broken up about your ex-husband."

She felt herself flush and, if one could feel such a thing, her blood beginning to boil. "That's enough. I resent that comment." After a moment's pause, she realized that angering in his presence might lead to her say something impulsive, and that might lead to her being asked to stay overnight in some locked place or at the very least sat down in front of someone like or worse than Bando. "My marriage to Raymond has been over a long time," she said, evenly. "But that doesn't mean I don't care. We didn't become friends after splitting up, but we weren't adversaries either. I'm truly sorry he's gone. If you don't believe me ..."

"And where were you last night?" Bando interrupted. "Between 7 and 8:45 p.m.?"

"I was with Robert Mitchum."

The lieutenant's eyes bulged. "What? What are you talking about?"

"I was watching 'Out of the Past' on TCM. Check the listings from last night if you don't believe me."

"You were alone?"

"Yes."

"You know that's a shitty alibi. That's no alibi at all."

"Do I need one?"

Bando regained the manila envelope and stuffed the papers he'd removed from it back inside. "I'll let you know," he grunted. "What caliber gun do you own?"

"A 38. What was Raymond shot with?"

"A 32. H&R Magnum by the size of the slug."

"Not the kind of gun you'd commit a murder with."

"Maybe not."

She sighed impatiently. "You're implying that if a 32 H&R was used, the shooter was probably a woman. Right?"

"I've always wanted to say this, Mizz Vape: I'm asking the questions here."

"All right." She rose. "Would you like to come over and search my place? No warrant necessary."

"Something else I've always wanted to say," he snapped. "Why does every P.I. have to have a smart mouth?"

The bar at the Misfit in the old Clock Tower Building on Santa Monica Boulevard was quiet for a Thursday night, usually a time when the celebrate-the-weekend-early crowd descended en masse upon the art deco digs. As it was this night, Dana Vape could perch herself on a red leather stool, nurse a scotch and water at the zinc bar and think about Raymond and what had happened to cut his life short so violently.

Severed from her life as he was, Raymond Scarry's interests and activities outside of his career as an investment adviser were unknown to her. Yes, he'd remarried and quickly, but she knew nothing about his second wife. So what was she to go on? Here Raymond was, on a Wednesday night, in a Redondo Beach motel room where he'd registered that afternoon, apparently alone. A few hours later, he lay dead on the floor in the same room. If the cops in RB had given her nothing that's probably because that's what they had – nothing.

She wondered, after finishing her first drink and gesturing to the bartender for a second, why they'd called her into the station immediately. If she was the first person interviewed, it had to be because they'd been so far unable to reach Raymond's wife. Or was she truly a suspect? What would be her motive? What was anyone's motive? Detectives on the scene did not report that her ex-husband's wallet had been taken or even gone through. There were no fingerprints in the room. She agreed that this killing seemed personal. It had all the earmarks of that.

But who was the person?

The worst thing about the Misfit was that it was walking distance from her Santa Monica apartment. Way too convenient. Ergo, she awoke the next morning two hours later than she'd planned to and with a spun-glass hangover. Just before slipping between the sheets the night before, she'd scrolled the photo archives from her old iPhone that she'd transferred to the Mac in her dining room/slash/office. That was where visual evidence of her fleeting relationship, including a marriage, with Raymond Scarry existed. It struck her a dozen stills into the perusal that there wasn't one photo where they both were smiling at the same time. Should have seen it coming, the breakup that is.

With no pressing business on her docket and minus any no-longer-avoidable errands on her docket, she brewed coffee, poured herself a steaming cup and began scrolling the 'net for any reports on Raymond's murder that might yield information she hadn't already been given.

Nothing. Not even a "MAN SLAIN AT MOTEL" news brief on the Santa Monica Daily Press site where the lead story of the morning was about a street musician on the pier who'd had his guitar stolen right out of his hands.

This frustration behind her, she resigned herself to a wakeup shower. During, she shifted her speculation from details of the shooting to what details there were or might be regarding a service for Raymond. Murder cases she'd been around for too many years to count told her that disposition of victims' remains and formal tributes to those victims rarely occurred with speed. Investigations and unanswered questions saw to that. Raymond had been a Presbyterian or some such, but not a religious person at all, and during their time together he'd never talked about what to do if he shuffled off the proverbial mortal coil sooner than anticipated. Quite the contrary. He was one of those people who lived for the moment, for better or worse, and the future was somebody else's problem.

Like hers, he'd say.

It was early that afternoon over some semblance of lunch that Vape hit on the idea of reaching out to the mutual acquaintance who'd told her

of her ex-husband's remarrying. That was Sharla Levinson who, with her then-spouse Jerry, had lived next door to her and Raymond in the Montana Avenue house.

Sharla had divorced and moved to the Valley, but Vape had her number and she answered on the second ring, clearly on her car Bluetooth from the ambient sound of wind and traffic beneath her voice.

She was not at all surprised that Sharla had heard about what happened. She'd even formed a theory, one like certainly the police were mulling: "He was expecting a 'friend' if you know what I mean, but Casey had followed him, beat the friend to the door and let the cheater have it."

"Casey?"

"Wife No. 2. You remember?"

"I never knew her name. So is there something to all this, Sharla? Was their marriage in trouble?"

"From Day One. Seems like the only thing they had going for them was a, you know, physical thing. Sorry, kid."

She wondered how Sharla knew all this considering she'd moved away before the remarriage. But she was not an unreliable gossip. Snarky, yes. Unrelenting, could be. But not unreliable.

After expressing her condolences for whatever feelings Vape had left for her ex, Sharla wondered aloud: "You've never seen her, right, Dana?"

"His wife?"

"Yes. Casey."

"No. How would I have?"

"Well if you ever do, brace yourself."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Ahh, never mind. Probably my imagination."

Sharla reached her motoring destination and the phone call went no further.

The fact that the day transpired with no incoming calls from anyone about Raymond, including follow-ups from the Redondo Beach Police, spoke volumes. Their brief life together had been so absent of interconnections that there was no one who might have reached out to her.

A potential client phoned midafternoon and babbled out a request for her to be intermediary in the "anonymous" exchange of some jewelry that had been stolen.

Vape did not commit.

Instead, she climbed into her car, drove out to the Santa Monica Pier. It was a hazy sunshine end of the day with the smell of salt and brine on the steady breeze and faint vestiges of the popcorn and fried food sold along the pier to the day's remaining tourists and locals. From the nearby Ferris wheel could be heard the pipe-organ rendering of "Happy Days Are Here Again," and as she sidled up to an unoccupied if damp viewpoint near the middle of the pier, she reflected on the irony of that tune being on the afternoon air.

The violent end of Raymond's life was a reminder, and a stark one, that no one minute after another was promised, and also graphic evidence that there were a lot of bad, bad people in the world whose misdeeds and worse seemed to go unchecked. Maybe the cops in Redondo would figure out what had happened and finger a perp. Maybe they wouldn't. She longed to see the official police report on the killing, but there was about as much chance of that as snow falling over the Santa Monica Pier.

When her phone rang in her purse, she considered not answering, especially when UNKNOWN CALLER appeared.

In the mood she was in, not quite foul but not at all friendly, she decided to answer and tell off the solicitor interrupting her contemplations – though odds are it'd be a recorded voice on the other end of the line.

Instead, she heard a live woman's voice: "Dana Vape?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

After a beat the caller said "My name's Casey Scarry. You don't know me."

"Wait a minute. Raymond's … wife?" She couldn't bring herself to say widow – not this soon.

"That's right. I looked up your number in the phone book."

"Why?"

"Because I want to talk to you."

She eased away from a family taking a group selfie to a more private spot along the pier.

"Look," she said into the phone, "I'm sorry about Raymond. I'm sorry for you and I'm sorry for me. But I don't know what else we'd have to say to each other."

There was no response.

"I don't mean to sound cold," said Vape. "It's just that …"

"Listen," she was interrupted. "I need your help. I think the police believe I did this. They think I murdered Ray."

Vape let this sink in a second or two. "Well you weren't arrested, were you? You haven't been charged."

"No," Casey Scarry hurried, "but I'm pretty sure they don't believe me when I told them I had nothing to do with this. I didn't, I swear. How could I?"

"For what it's worth, they called me in and checked my alibi too."

"Then you know how this feels. Please. Can we talk?"

"We're talking right now."

"I mean in person. Could you possibly come by the house?"

"Mrs. Scarry …"

"Casey."

"Mrs. Scarry, I don't know what you think I can do. The cops wouldn't tell me much. I don't have any information to share with you."

"Please? Just for twenty minutes or so?"

She sighed, and another sigh later she was taking down an address in the Palisades.

The Scarrys' house in the Huntington Palisades, an appealing New England traditional, possessed all the venerable, in-the-family-for-years veneer of just the kind of place someone NOT Raymond would own. Its high-pitched dormered roof settled upon two stories of off-white brick, with twin red chimneys protruding through its top and a columned portico entryway in front. A garden of primroses, violets and varietals in no particular relation to each other, though neat as could be, extended from the entry to the sidewalk gate that Vape swung open as she moved curiously along a pink-tiled pathway.

"Had to be the wife's taste," she thought, remembering her ex as a man who would have considered something as mundane as ferns "precious" and the luxury of two fireplaces in Southern California impractical at best.

Bisecting the garden on her path, she eyed a little gnome figurine decorating a flower bed, its beard nearly as tall as it was, the eyes drowsy looking, the grin just this side of lascivious.

Again, didn't seem like a Raymond house. Didn't seem like a Raymond anything.

As she approached the front door, it swung open and, not seeing her, a portly Latina woman in a pale blue dress and dark blue sweater emerged toting a plastic bucket full of cleaning brushes and liquids in brightly colored bottles.

"Oh, hello," she said, nodding toward Vape as she sideswiped her.

"Hello."

A little late for a cleaning person to be at a house, she thought, even if she was just leaving at the end of a day's work. Got to keep the house clean, even if the man of the house is dead.

It made her want to punch this Casey Scarry in the snoot even before she met her.

Once the cleaning woman pulled her sedan away from the curb with a puff of exhaust and a jarring backfire, Vape proceeded to the doorstep and knocked on the heavy oaken door with the brass knocker attached to it.

Fifteen seconds later it was opened by damned near a mirror image of herself.

Casey Scarry's lush auburn tresses fell a few inches longer than her own and there may have been a tinge of hazel in her own pair of green eyes, but the angular face and triangle mouth were the same. The height was exactly the same. The athletic build a match. Casey Scarry couldn't have been more than a year or two older or younger than she, and the black belted trouser pant suit she wore with the bare midriff top was not unlike something Vape might wear … when relaxing and not working. Even the erinite-green drop earrings visible between strands of red hair were familiar.

If Vape had her mouth open – and she must have – Casey Scarry appeared neither surprised nor unnerved by the living, breathing reflection on her doorstep. "Dana," she said in staid acknowledgement. "Thanks for coming."

When her guest, still too stupefied to respond, said nothing at all, Casey gestured her inside with a tilt of the head. "Come on in. Please."

The muted color scheme of a New England-style home, with its pale aquas, oatmeal grays and off-whites, seemed to accentuate the buoyant red hair belonging to Casey Scurry, who led the way through a foyer into a bright and airy living room with functional if not comfortable looking furniture but wide glass doors that looked out on a stand of trees and beyond that, a peekaboo view of the Pacific.

Casey was saying something, but Vape's thoughts were elsewhere. So this is what Sharla Levinson had meant by "Brace yourself." Jesus. This was what? Creepy? And how could this woman not be creeped out herself?

She was waved into a white upholstered armchair with two square pillows. Her hostess took a seat in one just like it– across from her.

For the first time, there was a suggestion of discomfort and anxiety in Casey Scarry's voice and on her until-then placid face. "Now, the reason I called you is …"

"Excuse me," Vape said, sitting forward. "I just have to say something first."

"What's that?"

"Well, doesn't it strike you as … I don't know, a little bizarre that you and I …"

"That we what?"

"That we *look* so much like each other." She'd raised her voice when not intending to. "You don't see it?"

Casey Scarry rose and retreated behind an overstuffed couch. "Do you think we can talk about why I asked you here, Dana?"

Vape threw up her hands. "Sure. Why not? Go ahead."

"I'm a little in shock," Casey said, her hands squeezing the pillows of the couch that came up to about her waist. "About what happened to Ray." Her voice broke. "You know our last conversation, two nights ago, was an argument. Over nothing, really. We didn't speak the next morning. And now he's gone."

The adept judge of character that she considered herself to be, Vape did not believe this woman was emoting for show.

"I'm sorry," she said solemnly from her chair. "Come on. Sit down and tell me why you called."

Casey circled around the sofa, drew a Kleenex tissue from a pocket in her trousers and then sat down in the chair she'd been in before.

"I know you and Ray ended badly," she said, dabbing at her mouth and nose. "But I'm sure he still cared about you."

"I know," Vape said, though not as sure as this wife sounded.

Casey stowed the tissue and straightened up in her chair, took a fortifying breath. "I'm all right," she said.

"Then suppose you tell me what makes you think the police suspect you, even after they let you go home."

Casey left her feet again and the pacing began. "They came right out and told me I had a poor alibi," she said, looking down at the floor, then at Vape, then at the floor once more. "I was visiting a friend in Bel-Air when this happened, but they said a friend naturally would cover for me."

"That sounds pretty thin," said Vape, crossing her leg. "Your alibi. But so's the cops' suspicions of you. In the first place, what would your motive be?"

"I have no motive," Casey declared, her fists tightening. "Ray and I loved each other. Sure, we had our scuffles, like the one I just told you about. But that was nothing important. The love never stopped!"

"Do you own a gun, Casey?"

"A gun? No."

"Well," Vape said, "if the police are still interested in you they must believe you had some kind of motive and that you have or had a weapon."

"That's all bullshit."

Vape recalled Sharla Levinson's imagined scenario, that Casey Scarry found out about her husband's planned tryst at the Surfrider, beat the rendezvous person to the motel and then shot Raymond when he opened the door. She hadn't learned enough about Casey to this point to lend that theory any credence at all. Nervous and agitated, Mrs. Scarry wasn't coming off as the most reliable testifier she'd ever come across, but a killer with a flimsy story?

"Let me ask you this," Vape shifted gears. "Who do you know who would have a motive to kill Raymond?"

"That's what's so hard about this," Casey retorted. "Ray had friends, not enemies. Everybody liked him."

"The police say the shooting was personal. That suggests a person he knew came to the door, or was there with him."

Casey bit her lower lip. "You mean another woman?"

"*Was* there another woman?"

Her hesitation in answering was, Vape thought, suggestive if not damning.

"We didn't cheat on each other," was her response, slow and dignified.

There was something galling about that answer, but before Vape could follow up Casey volunteered, with haste: "I know I'm being followed," Casey said. "If it's not the police then it's Art Pressley."

"Who's he?"

"A business associate of Ray's. He called me last night and accused me of doing this."

"What's his quarrel with you, Casey?"

"Beats me." She found her tissue again and slid it across her nose. "I suppose he thinks I was after Ray's money."

Vape did a double take. "Money? What money?"

"He had some," Casey acknowledged, voice softer. "Real estate deal he made about a year ago paid off. At first. But it wasn't millions and millions like Art thinks."

"What do you mean it paid off 'at first'?"

"Ray invested in this commercial development in Arizona. Because it was near a lake and not that far from the freeway a lot of tenants bought in. Then it turned out the lake was contaminated and so was part of the property. Bad news all around."

Vape's head was spinning. "I've got to say," she admitted, standing, "this is all getting very complicated." She looked out toward the distant Pacific through the glass doors. "I guess there's a lot more about Raymond that I didn't know."

Casey was by her side now. "You can help, Dana," she said, a yearning in her voice. "You're a private cop. You can find out who really did this. Before they try to pin it on me."

Vape swung around. "Mess into an active police case? You realize what they'll do to me if I try?"

"They won't do anything."

"Oh don't bet on that," said Vape with an ironic chuckle. "P.I.'s who involve themselves in active cases get their licenses suspended PDQ. It's already happened once to me. It happens again, I might never get it back." She observed what had become near-desperation in Casey Scarry's watery green eyes. "And besides. I haven't seen the police file on this and they're not about to let me see it. I wouldn't have much to go on."

"You've got everything I've told you," Casey insisted. "And I can tell you more about Ray if that'll help."

Vape strode across the room and stopped. "Shit, I don't know."

Casey had followed her. "Please, Dana. If you cared anything about Ray you'll help any way you can."

"Don't lay that on me. I don't do anything out of guilt or misguided obligation." She cursed again, beneath her breath. "I'm certainly not inclined either to get involved on just your say-so."

Casey's shoulders arched. "You think I murdered Ray too?"

"Maybe you did."

"Then why would I be trying to hire you to investigate?"

"Because prey is always safer when it knows who and when the predator is coming after it. That's why. For all I know, this is part of your little play-act for the Redondo Beach cops."

"It isn't, I promise you."

Vape heard her phone ringing in her purse. "I've got to go," she said.

Casey shook her head. "So you won't help me. You don't believe me and you won't help me."

The phone call had come from her doctor's office; probably an appointment reminder. Vape looked up. "Frankly, no and no."

She turned on her low heels and pointed toward the foyer from which she'd entered, Casey Scarry on her own low heels.

"Look, I'm prepared to pay you whatever your going rate is for services, Dana. Up front even."

Vape had reached the front door. She stopped. "For what it's worth, Casey," she said over her shoulder. "I guess I believe that you didn't shoot Raymond."

Casey's face brightened.

"But," Vape added immediately, "I'm not interested in trying to prove it. Goodbye."

Before she'd decided that her going daily rate and any expense money received on cases was not enough to sustain her business sufficiently, she'd had a secretary, a Savannah Blakemore, who worked out of the house three days a week. Took calls. Screened potential clients. Handled billing. Occasionally functioned as an operative if the duty was not deemed by her employer as dangerous. Now, with Savannah gone, the overhead, such as it was, of "Dana Vape Private Investigations, Inc." was lower and, if enough new business was generated, she got by. If the client was generous, better than that.

But she missed having Savannah to bounce ideas off on tricky cases or when it came to considering clients, as was the case with Casey Scarry. Savannah was only community college-educated and having grown up in a small town in Louisiana not exactly worldly. Yet she was whip-smart and a keen judge of people. She also knew how to listen to her boss and to provide helpful insight when asked for it.

What would she have said now?

Dana Vape had given it to Casey Scarry straight – sort of. She didn't believe the woman was responsible for her widowhood. But she didn't buy the rest of the scattered storytelling she'd heard at the New England traditional home in the Palisades. It had the feel of a cornered woman making up a story as she went along, and while Vape didn't always abide by the unofficial private eye handbook, she agreed all the way down the line with her peers who affirmed that if a client – or potential client – wasn't giving it to them straight, it wouldn't be tolerated. That hesitation about any infidelity in the marriage spoke volumes.

Yet it took a double scotch at the Misfit later that evening to force Vape to weigh an uncomfortable possibility and admit a bias: Because Casey Scarry either looked like her or had been made up to look like her, almost to a tee, she resented the woman and even despised her. That, coupled with the thought that Raymond had endorsed this "coincidence" or, more irksome to her, had gone out and married another version of his first wife, made Vape all the more obstinate about staying out of this matter altogether.

The cops in Redondo Beach may or may not have suspected Casey Scarry, but either way they wouldn't close this case as unsolved anytime soon. The murder of a well-dressed handsome executive from Pacific Palisades in a motel room in their town was unusual and sensational enough to motivate their underpaid but ambitious detective force for a long time.

A couple things the next day motivated her to stay interested herself.

It began with Art Pressley.

A muscular, very tanned 50 or so in a camel-hair blazer, slacks and incongruously, Top-siders, the man was leaning against the side of his silver Nissan Rogue, parked right in front of Vape's white Camaro convertible on 29th Street. She didn't give him much thought, other than the mismatching Top-siders and the stony stare he shot her as she approached her car.

She used her fob to unlock the door to the Camaro and was just about to walk around the rear of it to get in when the man stepped purposefully away from his Nissan.

"Mrs. Scarry?" he asked, and it sounded to her like an accusation.

She froze at the driver's side door. "Are you talking to me?"

"Mrs. Scarry, right? Do you remember me?"

"Should I?"

"Art Pressley," he said, not moving toward her. "We met a few times, at the Polo Lounge or Katana. The four of us. You and Ray. Me and Tania."

Vape remained very much on her guard. She was mindful of what Casey Scarry had said just the day before, and Pressley, a formidable physical specimen, was not to be ignored. She vaguely recalled having met him, as he'd said, at a couple of Raymond's firm's holiday get-togethers, always held at the Polo inside the Beverly Hills Hotel.

"I'm not Mrs. Scarry," she said, bracing herself, holding the door handle of her passenger door. "You know that."

He grinned, and the teeth that flashed were capped.

"You're not THE Mrs. Scarry. You're right. THE Mrs. Scarry is your friend. Your client."

"She's not my friend or my client, Art. So. You were watching her house yesterday. Like she said you were."

"I saw you go in and out," he replied, sounding very satisfied with himself. "Yeah. You were in there a long time."

"Just what is it you want?"

He took a step closer. Vape squeezed the door handle tighter.

"What I want," he said, "is that you should know she shot Ray. So don't waste your time trying to prove she didn't."

Her suspicions and her skepticism were in transit. How did he know Casey had shot her husband? How did he know she'd asked her to investigate?

Had he bugged the house in the Palisades as well as staked it out? And what the hell was his motive for these condemnations anyway? She remembered Pressley more and more as they stood six feet away from each other. What she recalled was not a dangerous man, but one she hadn't particularly liked when they'd met across a bar or a table at the Polo Lounge. He'd been a bit of a boor, especially after he'd had a couple of drinks.

She wanted no traffic with him now, however curious she might be about his accusations and his motives. She wasn't afraid of him but she didn't want to provoke him either, though it was doubtful he'd do anything out here on the street more violent than make pronouncements.

Confidently, she opened the driver's side door and swung one leg inside. "If you're finished with your little threat, Art, I have to be going. And don't bother following me. I'll be watching you."

She didn't wait for a response or look back for a reaction. Though she resisted redlining out of the parking space and onto 29th Street west, she gunned the engine for effect before pulling out, smiled, and proceeded on her way.

Once more, she rued the absence of Savannah Blakemore, whom she could have instructed to check out Art Pressley on TruthFinder. Being a galoot, though a well-dressed one, didn't necessarily mean he had a criminal record. But it would be good to know in any case.

So she waited until her morning's errands were through and she'd returned home to do the online search herself.

It turned out he wasn't a felon, but he'd been convicted two years back for misdemeanor assault and had spent 10 days in jail plus a fine. TruthFinder provided no specific details of the case or the conviction, but it had happened in L.A. County and while he was working alongside her ex-husband. Maybe Art Pressley was no felon, but neither was he a choir boy.

Again missing Savannah while she spent the middle of the afternoon billing, her computer lit up with a City News Service bulletin. Much of the time she ignored the notices from the SoCal news bureau but giving the screen a glance in the righthand corner she read the headline ARREST IN REDONDO MOTEL KILLING.

Opening the file she discovered no more than a brief, but what a brief: "Casey Scarry, wife of Raymond Scarry of Pacific Palisades who was found shot and killed in a room at the Surfsider Motel on PCH, has been arrested on suspicion of murder. An arraignment is set for Thursday."

Vape searched elsewhere on the web for 10 minutes for any other information, to no avail. She next considered phoning Lieutenant Bando for details and thought better of it. He'd be unlikely to provide any, and besides, there were alternatives.

She could always request an arrest report through the RB Police's website. But a name in her digital rolodex provided a faster means of getting more information about Casey Scarry being taken into custody: Jeff Treeparker, who'd been her South Bay mole-for-hire for years.

It required over an hour for him to get back to her, but when he did and she'd quoted a remuneration to his satisfaction, Treeparker promised her more information before the end of the day.

When it came she felt she'd been overcharged. There was only one thing she didn't already know: Acting on a warrant, police had found a 32-caliber H&R in Casey Scarry's home. No prints on it. A munitions test was pending.

Vape sat down in her kitchen, poured herself a glass of red wine and in its bouquet saw her reflection – and that of Casey Scarry.

Barbara Sha, a West Side attorney whom Vape had run across a couple of times on cases, was representing Mrs. Raymond Scarry. A schooled, calculating and very no-nonsense counselor at law with a reputation to

match, Sha carried a high price tag and a low tolerance for interference in her professional responsibilities. When first contacted by this private investigator who just happened to have been the first wife of her client's slain husband, she was reluctant to even take the call at her Westwood office. But after a few minutes of being on hold, Vape found herself with Ms. Sha on the other end of the line just the same.

"My client is agreeable about my talking to you," Sha began. "Only in a limited capacity you understand."

Vape was then given only two pieces of information she didn't have: that the police department's munitions personnel had matched the .32 found in Casey Scarry's bedroom – concealed in a small space torn under the box spring – to the weapon that had committed the crime at the motel; and that Sha was hoping to have her client released on bail if the charges weren't dropped at the arraignment.

"Do you think I could see her?"

"Why?" Sha replied.

"Ask her, counselor. Ask her if she wouldn't like me to see her."

"Why?"

"What is this, a game? Ask her, Ms. Sha."

Casey was being held at the Century Regional Detection Facility for Women, also known as the Lynwood Jail, in downtown L.A. It wasn't the first time Vape had visited the place in her 15 years practicing investigation, but it had been some time since she'd been there. Gray and cold, clammy and institutional, it was a galaxy away from the New England traditional home Casey shared with Raymond, even a few thousand miles away from Vape's own Santa Monica neighborhood.

Faces – of personnel, of denizens, of visitors alike – were dispirited, dull and forlorn.

She went through the extended, impersonal protocol of checking through security and verifying her credibility, of assuring everyone in a uniform that she herself was benign and unarmed. After half an hour, she was escorted by a female officer with blonde hair tied into an extreme bun toward a holding area, adjacent to which was a visiting room.

First to emerge from a side door was not Casey Scarry but a slim Asian woman in a tailored beige suit and carrying a brown leather briefcase with a shiny gold handle. Barbara Sha.

Vape stood at her rickety metal chair and stretched out a hand.

Sha marched over without reciprocating. "Ms. Vape," she nodded. "You have five minutes and I'll be sitting here while you speak with my client. Understood?"

"Yes ma'am," Vape said, and her lip curled as she did so.

They sat together, just about a foot apart, for a full minute before a sleep-deprived, haggard looking Casey Scarry, clad in dull prison orange and with her lusterless hair pulled back in a sloppy ponytail, was led into the airless room by a husky officer. They were no longer doppelgangers, not like this, Vape thought.

Casey appeared to ignore something Sha said to her while managing a hurried smile for Vape.

"Thanks for coming, Dana," she said hoarsely, as if she'd had the life kicked out of her.

"Sure. How are you doing?"

Her lower lip trembled. "How does it look?"

Sha leaned in from her seat beside her client. "Remember, five minutes."

"Casey," Vape said, masking her annoyance, "I told you I didn't believe you shot Raymond. Nothing's changed."

Casey nodded; her eyes were moist.

"So that gun," Vape continued, glancing at the uniformed officer who, arms akimbo, stood a few feet away watching them. "What was that doing in your bedroom?"

Sha intervened. "We've been through that, Ms. Vape. It was obviously a plant."

Vape turned her attention from client to attorney. "By whom?"

"We'll find out, I assure you."

"How?"

Casey Scarry interrupted, reached across the table. Her long fingers, their painted nails bitten down, clutched at Vape's forearm. "You find out, Dana. Please."

"That's enough, Mrs. Scarry," Sha chided her. "This woman is not in our employ."

"Our employ?"

Vape joined the fray. "Casey, do you think Art Pressley had something to do with this?"

"I said," Sha leaned in again. "We're looking into this, Ms. Vape. You're here strictly as an acquaintance at my discretion."

"Ms. Sha," Vape turned to her, "remember Raymond was my husband too."

"That has nothing to do with this."

"The hell it doesn't."

"Ms. Vape," Sha said, all self-control. "Your five minutes is up."

Vape was escorted away from the visiting room with more authority than when she'd been escorted into it. The last thing Casey Scarry called out to her was: "Please help me, Dana!"

That accomplished fuck all nothing, Vape decided as, frustrated and irked, she marched to her car.

It didn't seem, from what she'd learned, that the district attorney's office had much of a case against Casey Scarry. Certainly not enough to bring her to trial. And like her or not, Barbara Sha was a tough, proven attorney who would fight tooth and nail against that possibility.

The discovery of the .32 in the Scarry house was beyond providential. It had to have been planted. The gun it turned out was un-registered, which was not a surprise. That Raymond and Casey Scarry's marriage had been a fractious one wasn't either, but Vape saw nothing in their history to indict her for cold-blooded murder.

She'd be released, sooner or later.

That did not solve the case. Somebody had shot and killed Raymond Scarry.

She fielded a call five minutes after leaving Lynwood from a terse Lieutenant Bando at the Redondo P.D. reminding her that the Scarry murder case was an active one and that, her personal connections aside, she was to stay out of it.

"You don't even have a client," he snorted.

Rather than engage him in a cellphone contretemps she placated him with a condescending "Sure, sure, sure" and waited for him to cut her off. Which he did. Immediately.

What compelled her to remain involved nagged at her as she sat in her car across the street from the Scarry house on Alma Real Drive, engine idling. Pathetic and plaintive though Casey Scarry had been, both upon their first meeting and then at Lynwood, Vape admittedly didn't give a good goddamn what happened to her. There was little danger, she was convinced, of the woman being tried, convicted and worse. She'd be traumatized and humbled, yes, but nothing a week at the Golden Door couldn't ameliorate.

Then there was her disdain, ok make it contempt, for Vic Bando, whose dragging her into his interrogation room hours after the murder she now regarded as harassment. Suspecting Raymond's wife? That was fair game. Suspecting his long-past ex-wife? Ludicrous. It would be satisfying to end up having done his job for him (or instead of him). She was not one of the many private investigators who disliked cops as a rule. She simply tried to stay away from them. But Bando was an asshole.

So was Art Pressley, whom she suspected was all mouth and no muscle despite his size. She'd been spying her rear-view mirror on the way to the Huntington Palisades for his Nissan Rogue. He hadn't followed her. Whether his grudge was with Casey Scarry or with Raymond for some business or personal reason, she didn't much care. But why was he so fucking sure Casey had done the shooting?

Could it be wanting justice for Raymond that prevented her from letting go of this matter and returning to her life and her work? He'd been such an unlikely candidate to be shot down and killed. As steady and successful as his work life had been, his personal life had been perpetually messy – but never explosive, never violent. He could be smug and insulting and selfish – so could she, she admitted – but Raymond had in his way a soft heart. He loved women and loved to spoil them on the surface level, yet he'd been known to also make gestures of affection that went beyond mandated holidays or occasions. He'd sat by her bed when she had pneumonia and read to her. He'd held her tightly and stroked her hair the night she learned her mother had passed away. The niceties like opening the car door for her, pulling out her chair at a restaurant, walking on the street side of the sidewalk with her he never stopped observing, even when their marriage was near its end.

His eyes always lit up whenever they encountered someone's dog together, and it disappointed him that he was too allergic for them to have one.

She stood in the driveway and in the bright sunlight squinted up at the stately silent house. It still didn't seem like the sort of home Raymond would have chosen, and the more she learned about Casey it didn't seem like her sort of place, either. Yet here they'd lived together. But lived how? Did Raymond treat her as well as he did herself on the good days, and just as thoughtlessly on the bad?

The violets and primroses in the front garden needed tending; that she could tell even without possessing a green thumb. The mail hadn't been stopped – it bulged from the blue and white mailbox. A community newspaper that was distributed free was whisked around the driveway and had come apart in two sections.

Vape's eyes narrowed. The cleaning lady she'd seen here before would probably return and tend to some of the neglect. Hell, maybe the cleaning lady did it. Underpaid, underappreciated, unbalanced!

There was nothing she could do at the house now short of breaking in to look for clues, if there were any. That would be playing with fire.

Turning on her heels, she started back to the street and her car, then stopped.

Something was different. Something was missing.

She returned to where she'd stood before and scrutinized the garden. The grinning gnome figurine wasn't there anymore.

Having accomplished an easy two-hour gig for a client that required her to serve legal papers to a "dangerous" recipient who turned out to not be dangerous at all she got herself to the Misfit in time for happy hour.

To her happy surprise, none other than Sharla Levinson was already at the bar, lording over a tropical drink with umbrella protruding from it and trading quips with the affable young man in a vest who was busily serving customers.

"What the hell?" Vape declared easing onto the stool beside her former neighbor.

Levinson embraced her. "I was just about to call you to join me, D! You must've been psychic."

"Or psychotic," Vape quipped, settling herself on a stool. She noted that Sharla's once shoulder length hair was now in a platinum bob and what might have been the Botoxed texture of the skin around her cheeks and eyes furthered Vape's assumption that post-divorce her friend was starting out with a new identity and a new look. Sharla wasted no time in explaining that a job assignment at the small boutique accounting firm she now worked for had brought her from Studio City back to her old haunt.

"I couldn't resist a quick one at the Misfit," she said with relish.

It didn't take long, once Vape had ordered and been served her own happy hour cocktail, for the subject of Raymond Scarry and Casey Scarry to arise, with related mutual conjectures about Art Pressley, Barbara Sha and Lieutenant Vic Bando.

"Didn't I tell you she was a clone?" Sharla had erupted prior to the conjectures. "I mean, no offense."

"You should see her now," Vape had said. "In jail there's no resemblance whatsoever."

By the time their second drinks had been poured and served, Sharla was proffering her own notion about the lurid course of events. "I wouldn't be so sure she didn't do it, D. The two of them had some pretty loud set-to's. Jerry and I heard them through the window."

"That's no evidence she'd take a gun and shoot Raymond," Vape countered.

"She was crazy jealous, kid."

"Jealous of whom?"

"Any woman that looked twice at him."

Vape set down her glass with a clunk. "Are you saying Raymond was having an affair?"

Sharla Levinson shrugged. "I don't know. Could be. To a jealous woman with a temper that would light the fuse."

"So she sets him up for the shooting and then hides the murder weapon in her own bedroom?" Vape dismissed. "Come on, Sharla. Think it out."

"I have been thinking," she said with a sing-song cocksureness amplified by the booze. "And anyway, I don't like Casey Scarry."

"I don't like her either, but …" She stopped, deciding to run her other, related mystery by the tipsy but ever-theorizing Sharla. "Say, you know that little gnome figurine they have in the front of the house? I think it's red and white?"

"A gnome? You mean like a dwarf thing?"

"Whatever. I went over to the house today and it's not there."

Sharla set down her own drink and began to daub her mouth and chin with a cocktail napkin. "Hmm. I never noticed." Then her eyes widened. "But you know what having a gnome in front of your house means."

"It means something?"

"Yeah. It means swingers live there."

"Swingers? Sexual swingers?"

"Yes, changing partners. You know what? I wouldn't put it past those two."

Vape scratched at her chin. "Raymond never shared that inclination with me."

"Maybe it wasn't his idea," Sharla said, fishing in her purse and producing a lipstick. "Might be right up Casey's alley," she affirmed, running the lipstick around.

"So why's the gnome missing?"

Sharla stowed the lipstick and looked meaningfully at her friend. "They're out of business."

She was astonished to find, by Googling "PACIFIC PALISADES" and "SWINGERS" together seven websites, all of which claimed to be hookup portals for those who wished to, as Sharla Levinson had characterized it, "change partners." Naturally there were first names but no last names given for contacts for inquiry or connection. Not being conversant in this area and as a result naïve about which site, if any, could be trusted, Vape admitted to herself that looking for hints, or proof online, that Raymond and Casey swung in Pacific Palisades was strictly needle-in-a-haystack investigation.

"Goddamn algorithms!"

She discovered the next morning when checking her email on her phone that the price of researching swinging there the evening before was that all manner of borderline-lewd and implied open-relationship content was flooding her social media feeds. One, being even more precise and intrusively sinister, was a post advertising "West Side Couples Adventures."

With no small disgust, she slammed the phone down on the kitchenette table. What was the point of all this anyway? If she wanted to know whether Raymond and Casey had been swinging all she had to do was ask Casey, right? As long as Barbara Sha wasn't around when she asked.

The overriding truth was that Sharla Levinson was only speculating. For all any of them knew, a gnome statue was a gnome statue – a cute garden accoutrement and nothing more. Maybe a neighborhood kid had taken it, knowing that the owners of the house were gone.

It required an hour of other work at home before she took up her phone again and accessed Facebook. The feed seemed to have stabilized. But she immediately noted that among the "PEOPLE YOU MAY KNOW" on her scroll was Arthur Pressley. There was his chiseled face, as if smiling knowingly up at her.

Was this another cruel algorithmic trick? Or had this jerk been looking at her profile for some reason?

Casey Scarry was free again. Jeff Treeparker reported that at her arraignment the prosecutor was out-argued by Barbara Sha. The mere presence of the .32 in the Palisades house had not been regarded by the presiding judge as evidence sufficient enough to warrant formal charges.

"But she's sure as hell still suspect No. 1," Treeparker told Vape over the phone in uncharacteristically blunt terms.

As the next few days went by, it became clear to Vape that the shooting of her ex and its aftermath had taken up intrusive residence in her head. She found herself experiencing brain overload and lack of focus at the same time; her own work, what there was of it, was suffering, she knew that.

It had to be more than a burning desire to avenge Raymond. Lieutenant Bando was right about one thing: She didn't even have a client in this matter. She needed to let it all go.

The likely outcome was that either the cops would unearth better evidence against Casey, enough to charge her, or they'd find the "real" killer. Either way, these were scenarios outside her purview. The case was indeed still active, so for her to mess into it, as she'd told Casey, potentially risked her license.

So what was she doing at the Century City offices of the investment firm Westward Ventures?

Neither of the two receptionists behind the impressive pine desks in the foyer was known to her. The support staff at Westward had to have turned over a couple of times since she'd been married to Raymond. Even so, she'd only been in the office once or twice anyway.

"May I help you?" a whey-faced young woman with streaked blonde hair looked up at her.

As her lips parted, Vape realized that she hadn't made a plan ahead of time, and now she was being asked what her business was here. The first thing she could think of to say was: "Is Art Pressley in this morning?"

The receptionist never blinked. "Just a moment, OK?" Her fingernails clicked on a keyboard as she stared numbly at a computer screen in front of her. She ignored an incoming call buzzing on a console; the other receptionist, a fleshy young man with a neatly trimmed beard, answered.

Then Art Pressley himself strolled through the front door. He stopped, seeing Dana Vape.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh, Mr. Pressley," the first receptionist brightened. "This woman … oh, I don't know her name. I'm sorry."

"I know her name," Pressley interjected. He cocked his head, a gesture that Vape should step away from the reception desk with him.

She did.

"As I said," he muttered in a lower voice, "what are you doing here?"

"Now that I think of it, Art. I came to see you."

"What do you mean 'now that you think of it?'"

She grinned. "Could we chat in your office?"

"Why?"

"Better there than out here."

Grudgingly, Pressley led the way through a suite of well-appointed, carpeted office spaces to his own private domicile. As if contemptuous of whatever Dana Vape might say, he purposely left the door ajar and didn't offer a seat once the two of them were inside.

"If you're here on behalf of Casey Scarry, you might as well leave," he said, sitting on the edge of his huge desk and folding his arms akimbo.

"No," said Vape, "but I do have a question about her. Actually about her and my ex-husband that I suspect you can answer."

"You suspect? What are you talking about?"

"Simply this," she said, dropping her purse onto a chair. "Were they swingers?"

The darting of Pressley's eyes and the twitch in his lower lip told her instantly that they were and that he knew about it. The much taller man rose to his feet and positioned himself close beside her, rather in the manner that Donald Trump had employed in a 2016 debate onstage with Hilary Clinton. Pressley was an intimidating physical presence, and he fully intended to utilize that, as Trump had tried to do, to his advantage.

Vape wasn't biting. She never moved. "Well?" Her eyes flashed.

"That's inflammatory," he stammered. "You need to get out of here."

"I know it's true, Art," she said, lifting her purse again, "and it may have nothing to do with Raymond's murder." She made cold eye contact with him. "Then again – it might."

"I said get out of here. I'll call security."

"Art, all I want to know is why you're so certain that Casey did this. The D.A. isn't. She wasn't charged."

Pressley perceived that his Trumpian tactics were to no avail. He took an impatient breath. "You mean they let her go?"

"That's right."

"Shit."

Vape decided to tack in a different direction. "Did she or Raymond hurt you, Art? Is that why …"

"She's a crazy broad," he snapped. Then he turned his back on her and moved slowly toward his desk. "You know something?" he said when he reached it and turned around again. "You look just like her."

"So I've been told."

The faintest smile appeared on his lips, but only for an instant. "Ray deserved better. From her. And from you."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"It's not a compliment."

"I know." Vape stepped forward and stood behind the guest chair at his desk. "Let me ask you something else, Art."

He sighed again, more out of exasperation than anger. "What now?"

"Were you and … Tania, I think you said? Were you two and Raymond and Casey … in a relationship?"

His squint at her turned to a cold stare of hatred, and he slapped the top of his desk with an open palm. "That's a fucking lie!"

"I'm not so sure," Vape said, calmly.

He stood and pointed toward the door, now regretting that he'd left it ajar. "For the last time, get the hell out of here!"

"I'm going. But you can be sure if I've found this out, someone connected to this case will too." She backed against the door, widening it. "It might be to your benefit to level with me."

Rather than that, he strode toward her until she retreated out the door, which he closed with authority.

"Another crazy broad," he said under his breath.

She waited outside the Palisades house until the mail truck had come and gone. Then, deftly, she walked up to the mailbox, removed its contents and

stacked the bills and circulars and whatever else was there beneath the periodical she'd brought with her.

A black BMW M-5 parked in the driveway had to have been Casey's, though Vape was startled to see a "Baby Up Dis Bitch" decal pasted to the right rear window.

She proceeded to the front door and rang the bell.

Shortly it was opened by Casey Scarry. In cropped designer jeans and a side slit cardigan and with her head of buoyant hair freshly washed and free, she looked completely recovered from her brief deprived incarceration at Lynwood.

"Dana," she said with some surprise at the door.

"Brought your mail," Vape said, handing her the bundle with one hand, on the top of which was a copy of Swingers Lifestyle Magazine.

Casey's emerald eyes went wide with surprise. "What the ..." She looked straight at Vape. "This isn't ours."

"Ours?"

"This magazine," Casey said, pushing it back toward Vape. "Must be a mistake."

"No mistake, Casey," Vape said reclaiming it. "I managed to get a copy and brought it here. As a gift. For you."

Whatever welcoming mien Casey Scarry had adopted when first opening the door had become wariness and mild affront. "What's this all about, Dana?"

Vape strode past her and into the foyer of the house. "Glad to see you're out of Lynwood," she called behind her. "I told you they didn't have enough to charge you. And you had a pretty smart attorney on your side."

Inside herself, Casey closed the door tightly. "I didn't invite you in, you know."

"Oh really?" Vape was enjoying herself. "I thought you wanted me to work for you. Right? Aren't you interested anymore in finding out who killed Raymond?"

"You told me you didn't want to work for me," Casey said, now swiftly moving past Vape into the house.

Vape followed her as far as the step-down into the living room where the two of them stood a foot apart in the afternoon light streaming through a picture window. She drilled her gaze at Casey. "You know, to quote your friend Art Pressley yesterday, you and I do look just like each other."

Casey Scarry's nostrils flared and she sucked in a breath. "What the hell do you mean? Art Pressley's no friend of mine. And this magazine you brought over …"

"Should appeal to you," finished Vape.

It was obvious to her that Casey was steeling herself physically and otherwise against any telling reaction. She tossed back her thick auburn hair and pointed one manicured finger behind her. "I think you need to leave, Dana."

"I don't think so."

"You won't leave?"

"No Casey. Not until we've had a little talk."

"About what? I've told you everything."

"Not everything, soul sister. Come on. Pour us a drink and let's get down to it."

By the time they sat down together on a wicker lanai outside, Casey Scarry's resistance had dwindled and her arrogance vanished. She kept looking

down at her untouched highball glass and intermittently at her newly varnished nails.

Vape gave her some emotional space, but only for so long. As she sat next to her and watched this porcelain Palisades goddess go about inner torment she felt nothing like guilt but a lot like disdain. She had a hunch that what she was about to learn would not reflect well on her ex-husband, and now that mattered a hell of a lot.

"Why didn't you tell me," she began at last, "that you and Raymond were having a relationship with another couple?"

Casey, very still, continued to stare down into the surface of her highball glass. "I … couldn't talk about it."

"Why not?"

Casey looked up at her. "Why do you think?"

"You were ashamed?"

"No! There was nothing wrong with it!" She swallowed. "At least not at the beginning. You make it sound cheap, or dirty."

"I didn't judge it one way or the other, Casey. And I'm not judging you now. I just want you to tell me the truth."

Casey sat up, left the lanai and, carrying her drink with her walked to the picture window and pressed her face practically to the glass. Watching her from the couch, Vape's midsection was full of butterflies. It really was like seeing herself standing there, in another body, in another life.

"It started as just the four of us sitting around watching a movie here one night," Casey said softly, her back still to Vape. "We'd been drinking. A lot. Smoked a little pot too. And after this one scene in the movie, where all these couples start kissing each other, the next thing I knew Art was kissing me, I was kissing him. Ray had his arms around Tania and she was licking his neck and then Frenching him." She pressed the highball glass to her forehead. "I don't remember anybody saying anything about … you know, swapping. But

we were drunk and high, right? Ray started taking Tania's clothes off, there on the floor. And Art was reaching under my top and unhooking my bra."

Listening and envisioning what she was being told, Vape admitted to herself feeling just the slightest bit aroused, however seamy the narrative. Though it repulsed her to think of Art Pressley in a sexual situation, with anyone, she felt as if by body-to-body transmutation the tantalizing tingling under her skin that Casey Scarry must have felt that night.

"That was the start of everything," Casey was now saying, and her tone was rueful. "We were getting together a couple of times a week – here and at their house in Palms. A lot of fucking."

She swung around, the highball glass being squeezed tight in her hand. "It got out of control, you understand me?"

Vape had returned to the moment, though she had sweat on her lip and somewhere under her midi skirt. "What happened?" she gulped.

"Art and I came to despise each other," she said, bitterly. "We probably both felt guilty and it got to where I hated the sensation of his hairy body pummeling mine, like an ape. He always had booze breath too, the bastard."

Vape sat forward. "And?"

Casey looked toward the floor, and her tresses of hair fell sloppily across her forehead. "I could tell that Tania had fallen in love with Ray. It wasn't just physical anymore between them. She needed him. She started calling him at night. She was emailing him, sending messages and naked photos of herself. She kept calling. I was hanging up on her and she kept calling anyway. She was obsessed."

"What about Raymond?"

"I think he was into it at first, flattered. But I'm sure he didn't feel the same way about her. He was ducking the calls himself. I know he was."

"Were they getting together? Without you and Art?"

"Probably. I don't know."

Vape rose from the couch, walked slowly over to Casey Scarry and lay a hand on her broad shoulder. "Casey. Have you considered the possibility that one of them – Tania or Art – shot and killed Raymond?"

Casey's green eyes, wet with tortured memories, widened. "But why?"

"It doesn't take too imagination to imagine why." Vape began to pace close by, her mind working as it usually did when she felt close to enlightenment. "Let's say Raymond told Tania it was all over, that he was through. Maybe they agreed to meet at that motel to call it off."

Casey watched as if in stark disbelief.

"Art found out about Tania's feelings for Raymond, so he kept the appointment and pulled the trigger, then hid the gun in this house to implicate you."

"But …?"

"Or Tania, furious that Raymond wanted this to end, arranged to meet him at the motel, and there – she shot him. Either she concealed that .32 in your house to frame you or Art did it to protect her."

To Vape's astonishment, Casey's hands smoothed up the sides of her face, past her ears, pushing her hair into a dither. She screamed. Loudly. The ice- and booze-filled highball glass hit the floor and shattered.

Wrung out, she lay feet up on the couch in her apartment with a half-consumed glass of white wine in one hand and a warm, damp towel in the other which intermittently she pressed to her forehead. Her eyes were closed. It was evening now. The skies had turned from deep blue to a muddy gray out her living room window. The traffic along 29th Street buzzed with after-hours commuters: rumbling motors and the occasional irate honk of a horn or vestiges of music playing inside a moving vehicle.

The television set across the room was turned on and playing below normal volume a rerun of a Rodgers & Hammerstein celebration on KCET. She'd glanced at it for just a moment before closing her eyes, long enough to

glean that performers at Theatre Royal Drury Lane in London were parading on and off the stage, rendering R&H standards before an appreciative audience.

The compress tighter against her brow, she listened to the vague sounds of someone singing "This Nearly Was Mine" from "South Pacific":

"One dream in my heart

"One love to be living for

"One love to be living for

"This nearly was mine."

For a second, somewhere in her subconscious on the verge of sleep, she loved Raymond and she missed him. It pained her that all that was left of his tangible self remained in cold storage somewhere pending disposition of his body. Christ, that sounded so clinical and so legal.

She sipped at the lukewarm wine and, lying prone as she was, dribbled it on her neck and chest.

The ballad had ended, giving way to muffled applause from the TV theater audience; an intrusive voice soliciting donations from viewers followed. Setting the wine glass on the rim of the coffee table and the leaky compress on the carpeted floor beneath it, she rolled over on her side and opened her eyes. The drama of a few hours before replayed in her head.

She'd left Casey Scarry alone and in a state of nervous exhaustion. After pouring a little brandy into her and encouraging her to lie down and try to sleep, she drove home to Santa Monica and attempted to do the same, but with chardonnay instead of the more potent E&J.

What was to be done now? In spite of her projections to Casey, she still possessed no hard evidence, certainly not enough to call Lieutenant Bando in Redondo Beach and directly re-involve herself in police business. Casey's reaction, which to Vape somehow smacked of an overreaction, indicated that she too was inclined to believe that Art Pressley or Tania Pressley or both

were responsible for Raymond's murder and for the planting of an incriminating weapon in the Palisades house.

A braver or more foolhardy private dick than she would have been already on the way to the Pressleys' home, armed with not-so-veiled accusations. But what would come of that but vehement denials, assuming she were even allowed in?

Something had to be done. Just not tonight. She had neither the strength left nor the fight inside for anything tonight.

The performances on the PBS program had resumed and a different tenor from before was emotively singing "You'll Never Walk Alone" from "Carousel." Not drunk but woozy and spent, Vape just about lost it in the middle. She kept seeing Raymond wandering in a malignant vapor, a bullet hole in his chest, arms outstretched, looking for someone or something.

How the hell, she wanted to say to him, did you get yourself mixed up in something like this? And why did it have to end this way?

The security buzzer on the entry wall jolted her into a half-sitting position on the couch. Someone downstairs at the apartment's front door. Swinging her legs onto the floor, she wondered if it was worth the effort responding. She wasn't expecting anyone. Most likely one of her neighbors had locked him or herself out and needed help entering, or an Amazon driver had arrived with some delivery she'd forgotten ordering.

The box buzzed again.

"Fuck it." She wobbled her way to the box and pulled down a switch to speak. "Yes?"

"Dana, it's Casey."

Vape closed her eyes and sank against the wall. No. Not now. No more.

The box buzzed again.

Vape activated the switch again and answered wearily. "It's late, Casey. Come on."

"It's 7:30," was the response. "Please, Dana? Just a minute or two?"

At least she sounded composed.

"All right. Come on up." Vape pressed the admit button.

Casey Scarry had cleaned herself up and changed since the time Vape had left her house in the Palisades. Not that this woman ever looked like she *needed* cleaning up – except during that brief stay at the women's detention center.

She also appeared calmed down and in control of herself, stepping into Vape's apartment in her red high heeled shoes and waiting to be shown to a chair in the living room.

"Sorry about the mess in here," Vape said, picking up the compress from the floor and rearranging a scatter of magazines and papers on the coffee table, then realizing that she was barefoot. "I wasn't expecting visitors."

"No worries." Casey opened her purse. "Would you mind terribly if I smoked a cigarette?"

"I didn't know you smoked," Vape said, settling on the couch and shifting cushions aside. "I've never seen you …"

"I'm trying to quit," Casey said, producing a pack of Marlboro Lights and a gold-plated lighter.

"Sure you don't mind?"

"Go ahead."

Vape realized she kept no ashtray on hand and was thinking about what could be used instead, when Casey crossed her legs, blew smoke ceiling-ward and said "I needed this."

"Are you feeling better?"

A quick nod of assent. "Yeah. Your visit this afternoon, well it threw me. You know?"

Vape forgot about the ashtray. "Have you been thinking about what I said?"

Casey took a puff. "Yes."

"I'm sorry I had to spring it on you that way, Casey, but you weren't leveling with me before and I couldn't think of any other …"

"I said it's all right."

The interruption startled Vape. "Well, any ideas of what we might do next? I've been thinking it over and I'm not sure myself."

"Why," Casey asked, tapping the ash on the end of her cigarette into an open hand, "do we have to do anything, Dana?"

"Because," Vape replied, ignoring the dunking of ashes, "Raymond was murdered and we think we know by whom. We can't just let that go. It's not safe for you, for one thing. Probably not safe for me either." She rose, marched to the kitchen and returned a moment later with a plastic tumbler generally used for drinking juice. "Here," she handed it to Casey.

Casey dropped the unspent Marlboro Light into the receptacle. "You're talking about that shit Art Pressley," she said, looking up at Vape, "and his little shit of a wife."

"Worse than shits, Casey," Vape stood over her. "If we're right one of them's a killer."

She walked back to the sofa and crouched to sit down. In doing so, she observed that Casey now had a fat tear running down her left cheek. "Hey. I'm sorry to be blunt, but there's no nice way to talk about murder."

"No," a teary Casey said, shaking her head. "There isn't." She slipped her right hand into the top of her purse and pulled out a coal-black revolver. She pointed it at Dana Vape.

"I was hoping it wouldn't come to this," Casey stood up, her voice a tremor. "But it has, Dana."

Vape slowly came to her own feet. "Are you telling me," she said choosing each word cautiously in spite of the fear coursing through her body, "that you shot Raymond?"

"I didn't want to," Casey said, her tenor rising, her voice now strangled with emotion. "But he was going to leave me for Tania Pressley. He was in love with the fucking bitch."

As she listened Vape almost subliminally weighed her options here. They were zilch. She was four feet away from a woman with a presumably loaded gun pointed directly at her. She believed that Casey Scarry would pull the trigger. How could she not believe it?

Keep her talking.

"You told me," Vape said, hands at her side though shaking, "that Tania was in love with him. Obsessed, you said."

"They were obsessed with each other! I knew it. Art knew it." She gritted her teeth. "I hacked into Tania's email. Sent Ray a message to meet her at the motel."

"And what about the gun?"

"I meant to get rid of it."

"You should have thrown it in the ocean, Casey. Hiding it in your house, that was stupid."

"Maybe so."

Vape instinctively put her hands up, as if she was being robbed. "I don't understand. You told me, you swore to me, you had *nothing* to do with this. You tried to hire me to help you prove who did do it."

She observed Casey's hand, the one point the gun, starting to waver up and down, just inches each way.

"What was I supposed to do, Dana? Sit in the house and wait for the police to pick me up? Which they did."

"So?"

"I needed to have somebody on my side. I figured with you on the case that would plant enough doubt in the cops' minds. What I was wrong about was underestimating you. I didn't think you'd get this far."

Vape stiffened. "You obviously forgot what I told you that day at your house. About the prey feeling safer when it knows who the predator is. You also forgot that I cared about Raymond and I don't want the person who killed him to get away with it." Against her better instincts she couldn't help but declare "You are a fucking liar, Casey. And not even a good one."

The second she'd said it she shuddered.

Casey tightened her two-handed hold on the gun. Vape could practically look down its dark, deadly barrel. "We're both liars, Dana. Remember: We're the same person. You said so yourself."

"I never said that."

"We both killed Ray!"

"That isn't true."

"Admit it! We both killed him! And we're both going to kill Tania Pressley next."

Casey, tears on both cheeks now and somewhere in between temper and incoherence, cocked the gun's trigger.

Vape threw herself down and directly into Casey's knees as the gun fired, the bullet smashing into the wall behind the couch. On top of her, she tried to wrestle the gun from Casey's grip and took a sharp knee to the breadbasket. The air sucked out of her, she felt a screaming Casey now tearing at her hair with her free hand.

Struggling to regain her wind, Vape flashed on two indisputable and dangerous realities: Though a dead ringer for her, Casey Scarry was physically stronger than she; and, worse, she was the one with the loaded gun.

She swung a wild punch through Casey's flailing arms and partially connected with her jaw; that gave her all the time she needed to leap free, clamber over a chair and an occasional table to the front door, fling it open and shoot down the stairs, two desperate steps at a time.

Hurdling the last three, she landed on one foot but upright on the ground floor just as another shot sounded and the glass-encased fire extinguisher attached to the wall facing the staircase erupted in shards.

Either she'd been lucky or Casey Scarry was a bad shot.

As she bolted for the first-floor entryway and the path out of the building, she heard a terrible clamor of limbs thudding down the staircase behind her. Then silence.

Casey Scarry lay in a heap at the bottom of the stairs, her head and mouth bleeding, her eyes half open, one of her high-heeled shoes upright on the last step, the handgun on its side a few feet away.

With the permission of Raymond Scarry's estranged brother in New Jersey and with his jailed widow, now charged with murder, having no say in the matter, Dana Vape was able to claim her ex-husband's body, have it cremated as his will had decreed, and secure a crypt for him at Hillside Memorial near Playa del Rey. It wasn't the same exact place but not far from the cemetery where she knew his mother was buried.

She didn't know much about his mother – she'd been gone for years and Raymond rarely talked about her. What she did know was that his mother had red hair – shimmering russet hair. She remembered from a photo he'd framed but never put on display in the home on Montana.

She also knew her name had been Catherine.

Vape did not linger or pray at the wall of remembrance at the facility before leaving. She simply touched the marble with her fingertips and uttered under her breath "Look out for your boy, Catherine. For all of us."

On her way through the parking lot to her car she caught herself beginning to lose it. From her open purse, she pulled loose a handkerchief and pressed it against her nose and mouth.

Behind the wheel and composed, about to press the starter button on the Camaro's console, she had what under the circumstances seemed like

a silly thought: Wonder what happened to the gnome from the front yard garden? Somewhere the little marble fucker was probably enjoying this tragedy. This made her sick and sad.

There Are No Words

From the (very) personal journal of Brian Marsh, NYPD

I met Kit Harper at the Museum of Modern Art. She was there to attend a reception for the Dominican painter Angel Abreu.

I was there to arrest somebody.

She got lipstick on the artist's collar during the meet-and-greet. I collared my perp from among the crowd without incident and without resorting to any violence.

But before that happened – the arrest, that is – I'd made this petite brunette's acquaintance as we stood together examining one of Abreu's "Nocturnes," a work of acrylics on linen named for Frederic Chopin. I remarked self-consciously that Chopin was my favorite composer, to which she'd responded:

"Ohhhh, too sad for me."

How could I not have been charmed by that?

We didn't speak again until after the arrest had been made, and two uniformed colleagues of mine – I was in street clothes as I always was – had

ushered the prisoner from the gallery space, barely distracting the revelers but absolutely catching the attention of the woman for whom Chopin was too sad.

"Wait a minute," she said, pulling me out of a circle of museum-goers with a mixture of urgency and surprise in her voice. "You're a cop?"

I nodded. "And an art lover."

Her large hazel eyes flashed. "Right. So what did he do?"

"Who?"

"The man you had dragged off."

"Forger."

She seemed to do a double take. "Paintings?"

"Signatures," I said. "Bank notes."

"Uh huh. So what was he doing here?"

"Same as you. Admiring the art."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Are you fucking with me?"

I was a little startled. "It's the truth. More than that I can't tell you."

"I'm not that curious."

"Oh. OK."

A young man in a white vest and red bow tie swept by with a tray of glistening flutes of white wine. She procured two of them with a flick of her wrist and turned to me. "Buy you a drink?" she thrust one toward me.

This was the woman I'd been waiting to meet since I'd come to New York City from upstate.

Three days went by before I saw her again. That night, after a dinner together at a little place in the Village, we walked through Washington Square Park and I kissed her. It was one of those warm, salty kisses that in it contains tenderness of the rare kind you are destined to cherish, whatever the future might bring.

When we drew apart we were both aware of the recognition in each other's eyes. I barely was aware of the wailing blues guitar a fellow in a denim vest and woolen watch cap was playing in a corner of the park. Conversations, spread out in every direction around us, dissolved into whispers.

Kit Harper tapped the center of my chest with her knuckles. "I'm not sentimental, you know," she said.

"What ARE you then?"

"Just a good kisser."

"I am too."

"Yeah, I think you are."

I felt her hands fold behind my neck. Reprise.

"A policeman is our friend you know

He keeps us safe from crooks
And so It seems an awful shame
To give him dirty looks

"Cuz law and order isn't fun
It's reaching for the sky
A policeman's work is never done ...
Until his time to die."

This terrible child's chorus, sung like ring around the rosie, inhabited a dream of mine at the end of the long first day I'd spent at the Police Academy in College Point, Queens. I don't remember any of the little faces, but the little voices I could not and cannot forget.

Riding shotgun beside a uniformed officer whose twin howitzer forearms stretched the short sleeves of his blue shirt to the limit, I clung to the dashboard as we sped down Lexington Avenue toward Gramercy Park. We dodged in and out of idling traffic and missed a sideswipe on the passenger's side, where I sat, by inches. We were by all indications the first car responding

to a fleeing man with a handgun who'd less than five minutes earlier held up a store. These weren't the sort of calls I usually responded to, but the regular partner of the steel-jawed cop driving us had thrown up his lunch with the flu. I'd been handy at the precinct house, so off I went.

With the siren blaring and the sedan flashing lights, cars on either side of us seemed to slow but didn't stop. This didn't make it any easier to avoid anything impeding our pursuit, but we caught a break. We'd no sooner identified the suspect not more than 50 yards away, scrambling over and into unwary pedestrians in the misting rain, than did his legs come out from underneath him, he slipped on the wet ground and fell ass over teacups into a couple of newspaper racks.

"Got him!" my companion shouted from behind the wheel, though we didn't have him, not yet.

With a high-pitched squeal of the brakes, our car came to a violent halt but not before its rear end overtook the front and we found ourselves two wheels up on the sidewalk.

We both bolted from the front seat; my door pushed open wide and slammed into a concrete post with a metallic clang.

Though he was at least 20 pounds heavier than I and wearing a packed holster, the officer with me beat me to the gunman, who at that moment was trying to sit up, a bulky plastic bag still in his right hand grip.

We both had our guns drawn and laser-aimed at the stunned and scraped up perp. His own weapon, which he'd lost in the wet tumble, I spotted a few feet away on the sidewalk. As my "partner" seized the man, whose callow face and wide, wet eyes were those of a kid, maybe a teenager, I dragged the fumbled gun toward me with my right foot and picked it up. By this time, the officer and his captive were on their feet and both coughing, the kid restrained in cuffs behind his back.

I read him his rights and we got him into the back of the car. The uniform got on the radio and began to report in. He was breathing heavily

through the report, and one of his stretched shirtsleeves had been torn in the arrest and the skin beneath it bloodied.

Me, I sat in the shotgun seat and listened to the kid behind us calling out protests in heated Spanish, interrupted frequently by "fucking this" or "fucking that" in very clear English. Processing that along with the static voice on the police radio and the splatter of more persistent rain on the front windshield, I exhaled and with thumb and forefinger pinched the space between my eyes. No relief.

"Dickheads! Fucking DICKHEADS!" This was not the prisoner in the back seat shouting but a woman in ragged clothing, crouched and scowling, with her enraged face pressed practically against my passenger-side window. Her eyes were ablaze, her wiry arms whirling as she persisted with the invectives. It wasn't anything I hadn't heard before, either directed at me or at any number of people I dealt with on the street, but in this moment with my senses in complete overload, I felt the shockwave. My staring back at her only had the effect of inciting her further.

"DICKHEADS!" she screamed again, more shrill than before.

The officer beside me, now off the radio, was busy trying to stifle the suspect squirming and complaining in the back seat. I looked over my shoulder just for a second to watch them when the window on my right exploded and all at once I had sharp sprinkles of glass in my hair, on my shoulder and in my lap.

The woman outside was clutching a black baseball bat, with which she'd smashed the rolled up window. I sprang from the car before she could bring home another furious swing.

This time I was the one on top of the perp, forcing my entire weight on her back as I caught the handcuffs tossed to me by the uniform and put her under restraint. Still cursing, she tried to spit at me but, face down, it went nowhere but into the rain and the asphalt.

The crowd that had by now encircled all this activity began to shout at us. More fury, more spleen.

Two backup cars arrived, one of them damned near barreling into the bystanders before careening to a stop.

I was up on my feet, trying like hell to keep this manic, deceptively strong woman from kicking my legs and shins. I felt little pieces of glass irritating my neck and the side of my face. I tasted blood.

At least the rain stopped.

"A SUSPICION OF BLUE" / Oct. 4, 2023

A "good shooting."

That's what they call it when a police officer's shooting of a suspect, even if that shooting results in a fatality, is justified as a matter of self-defense or the life-saving defense of a hostage, a fellow officer or an innocent-bystander civilian. A review board attached to Internal Affairs makes this decision based on investigative reports, evidence at the scene and testimony of eyewitnesses and/or character witnesses.

These decisions can be appealed, but only by the officer himself or herself, and no one would appeal a ruling of a good shooting. You get it, you live with it.

This hasn't happened to me, mind you, not in 14 years on the force. Truth be told, I've never shot anyone in all that time. Hope I never have to. Guns, I don't like them. We carry them, we know how to use deadly force, but we don't want to.

It did happen to the guy I went to the police academy with, a guy whose partner I was the first year on the force, a guy who used to be one of my closest friends.

He ended up doing what I never thought he'd do.

He quit."

I had no preconceived notion to take Kit Harper to bed with me the night of our second date, at a jazz showcase of emerging artists at Lincoln Center. We'd sat at the bar in the Appel Room, shared cocktails and some conversation

before the band came out, and savored both the sumptuous music and the view of Central Park and Columbus Circle through the glass wall behind the stage. The room was awash in energy, urbanity and sensuality. The spontaneity of improvisation punctuated by appreciative applause and exhortation of the musicians. Perfume and alcohol combining to make the very space an aphrodisiac.

That's the writer in me. Really, it was a youthful band, an audience composed mostly of their friends hollering and clapping, and lots and lots of drinks ordered and toasted over and consumed.

It had begun to rain by the time Kit and I climbed the stoop fronting my 21st Street brownstone. When I unlocked the smudged door to the tiny lobby where welcome warmth awaited us, we encountered old Mr. Maggio, who managed the apartment building. He was grouchy by nature but he had a soft spot for me – his grandfather in the old country had been a policeman. Though it was after 11 he was holding a whisk broom and had an apron over his baggy trousers. We exchanged brief hello's and I led Kit to the staircase.

"Sorry," I told her. "No elevator."

"Don't apologize," she said. "Stamina I've got plenty of."

There was more than a hint of innuendo there.

Cut to when it was over, two beautiful hours later, and I lay back, not wanting to sleep, with Kit close to me. I wondered if I'd really fallen in love for the first time. Much later than I'd ever expected.

She breathed against my chest, having fallen asleep herself. I kissed her forehead and glimpsed the rain pattering against and spotting the glass of my one bedroom window. This was as warm and peaceful a moment as I could remember since I'd moved to NYC.

When I finally closed my eyes, either the rainfall had intensified or I heard a shrill voice excoriating again "DICKHEADS!"

I opened my eyes and looked quickly at the window. It was still intact, still absorbing rain, no glass broken or flying.

Kit stirred but didn't awaken. I threaded the fingers of my left hand through her hair, lightly.

We'd had two dates and now we'd slept together, but we still knew so little about each other. I knew that she was highly intelligent and attractive and fun as hell. I didn't know where she was from, though she had enough Brooklyn in her speaking voice that this might have been a possibility. I didn't know what she did when not patronizing a museum or listening to jazz or residing in a SoHo walkup with a ginger cat named Otis. I didn't know how she felt about being with a police detective, much less about someday, maybe, being in a *relationship* with a police detective.

My phone, sitting flat on the night table beside the bed, buzzed. I'd turned off the ringer while we were still at the jazz club. It was probably 2 in the morning by now. No one I knew on any personal basis could be calling me at this hour.

I declined to answer. Refused to pick up and hear something like: "Sergeant Marsh? We've got a situation. Get right down here!"

They could do without me tonight …well, this morning. I'd choose to be selfish, I'd be irresponsible.

Now I was on the verge of sleep.

For the rest of the night, I wanted to be nowhere else but in the arms of Kit Harper.

I'd been on the force less than a year when, through a classmate who'd been assigned to Staten Island while I'd stayed in Queens after graduation, I was introduced to a girl named Julie James. She was my age – 21 – and an aspiring stage actress who'd graduated from community theater to doing experimental roles at The Brick in Williamsburg and a couple of television commercials in Manhattan. Julie had one of those infectious, electric personalities that so canceled out the shyness I had back then. She probably had everything

you'd want in a performer, except the ego, and that made her charming and, everybody said, wholly lovable.

Julie brought me out of my shell and showed me the allure of live theater and, in taking me with her a couple of times to her family home in Northport on Long Island, helped me appreciate the kind of small-town life I'd left behind myself in Skaneateles.

But – yes, there's a but.

"I'm sorry, Brian," she'd said at the end, her voice breaking and her ordinarily winsome face taut with pained resolve. "I can't keep doing this. I can't be with a policeman. Every time we part I'm afraid that I'll never see you again."

It was not an acting job. Julie meant it, every word.

I felt Kit's hand graze my face. She gave out with a soft hum but didn't open her eyes.

So I continued to hold her close to me until I fell asleep.

Under my senior-high photograph in the Comet yearbook it reads, among other things: "*Wants to be another JD Salinger or James Baldwin.*" Being one of the editors of the Comet, I could have expanded on that and written much more about myself, but there were too many others to mention. I was an inveterate reader and a prolific writer, as prolific as I could be while trying to otherwise be an active, popular teenage boy in upstate New York.

Halfway through that senior year, after I'd exhausted – at least in my mind – the possibilities afforded by short stories (I'd written five of them – I'll share the names later), poetry and essays, I started work on my first attempt at a novel: "Sneaking Suspicion." The premise was the odyssey of an angsty young man (I was a young man but not especially angsty myself) who resided in a small town (which I did), had convinced himself that his long-lost father whom he'd never met resided in a big city, and that once he tracked him down,

he would, like Siddhartha, attain enlightenment. Hermann Hesse's book had been the first profound reading experience of my teen life.

As if someone else entirely had taken over my creative juices, however, 30 or 40 pages into "Sneaking Suspicion" it had turned into a cop novel. The angsty young man, already enlightened, saw his future not on some amorphous journey through the dark streets of a big city but entrenched there and, physically and mentally empowered, on an undercover solo crusade to collar a drug kingpin.

I'd resorted to every cliché in the proverbial book. Ninety pages in, I stopped writing. I never went back to "Sneaking Suspicion." Instead, less than a month after graduating from SUNY Cortland with a degree in criminology I enrolled in the big city's police academy. "The Writer" spent his days not writing but inside a mock precinct station house, on a firing range, in a tactical village.

My last week in the academy, a fellow recruit accidentally shot himself, my parents' house back in Skaneateles was stripped clean by burglars while they'd been away on a holiday, somebody shot up a subway train waiting to depart Bowery Station, and I started another novel without a title.

It's still waiting for a title … oh, and a book to tack onto the dedication I wrote:

"To all the innocents."

We had enough on Jimmy "The Rhino" Rabello to know that he'd been dealing crystal meth primarily to teenagers in Hunts Point, a neighborhood in the South Bronx that I rarely ever worked. I was not a member of the narco specialty squad and all I knew about this scumbag I knew from talk around my precinct, far flung as it was from Rabello's arena of operation.

So what my partner, Detective Sergeant Lester Hayashi, and I were doing outside the ramshackle house in which Rabello resided made no sense to me in the order of things, NYPD speaking.

"Don't fuck with me," Captain Clayton had told the two of us an hour earlier at our Midtown Precinct South stamping grounds. "Just get out there, and take a couple of uniforms from the 41st Precinct with you."

So the five of us huddled in the drizzle in front of the two-story building on Manida Street: myself, Les and three shivering uniforms whose combined age couldn't have added up to a number over 75. I could see deep behind their wide wet eyes, every one of them, that they were scared, and why not? Rabello by all accounts had a jones for guns as well as for peddling meth. He was a violent offender, an impulsive maniac with no purported conscience. We didn't know whether he was inside, but if was, taking him wouldn't be easy or pretty.

We had a warrant and we had guns. What we didn't have was any idea whether he was even inside and if he was, did he know we were coming for him? Rabello, for all his business trafficking, was said to be a loner so we didn't harbor serious anxiety that he had friends inside with him, but there certainly was no guarantee.

Lester, who had been my partner for three years, and I had been through something like this a couple of times before. We'd never had to fire a shot. As we poised ourselves not six feet from the entrance to the rowhouses where the unknown lurked, it occurred to me as I held my Glock 19 outstretched in front of me and Les did the same, that this afternoon might be different.

Two marked cars pulled up on the street and four more officers emerged to keep the gathering crowd at bay. Some among the neighbors cried out, absolutely alerting Rabello if he were inside that he had unwanted company.

Lester and I exchanged wordless glances, braced ourselves and with measured strides and the uniforms behind us, stepped through the entry and moved toward the first-floor unit where Rabello lived. It was dark and dingy inside, with no one around. Looked like the kind of place that rodents would be comfortable in if they could afford the rent.

When we reached his door, we found it ajar and a glimmer of light coming from inside, but no sound. We wouldn't have to kick it in, but possibly we were expected. What was on the other side of the door?

Not only had I, in a dozen years, never fired a shot in a situation like this, but I'd never actually shot at any other human being, at least not close enough that I might have hit him, or her, or them. There was always a first time for everything in this gig of mine, and I knew that Lester, whose experience mirrored my own, was likely thinking the same thing.

I signaled that we go in, all of us.

Customarily, we would force the door open and, guns in the air, protect ourselves immediately from anything lethal coming our way. Which we did. But finding ourselves in a malodorous, unkempt rat's fest of a living room with more trash and heaping ashtrays than furniture, we knew Rabello either had fled or awaited us in another room.

So he did. Motionless. On his side. Eyes open and staring blankly ahead. Clothes just hanging on his lifeless body.

It was Les who knelt down and pressed his hand first to Rabello's neck then his wrist.

He nodded at me.

Overdosed.

Dead.

"A SUSPICION OF BLUE" / Oct. 18, 2023

The first addict I ever encountered, a young woman, begged me to blow her away because she was so desperate and in such pain. "I may be a junkie," she told me at one point. "But I'm not a dealer." Her demon of choice was an oxymorphone called on the street Blue Heaven.

Whizz was what this other guy's stuff was called, the stuff he peddled to junior high and maybe high school kids in the neighborhood and the same stuff that killed him in the end. Found him on the floor of his own place. Not usual

at all using what you sell, "shitting where you eat," as I've heard it called. Part of me wanted to feel sorry for him, but I didn't have it in me. He didn't deserve my pity, though he was a human life. A human lowlife.

This is the price you pay for doing THE RIGHT THING, friends. This is JUSTICE.

Grant Clayton was pissed off. A reporter from the Times, Jacqueline somebody, had brought to his attention the fact that a blog was out there in the web world purporting it seemed to be on the inside of NYPD police work. Being online you could read it anywhere, of course, but Jacqueline somebody and the paper's digital media editor had concluded that the content of the blog, called "A Suspicion of Blue," was connected to NYPD business.

"If somebody in this department is writing this shit I'll have him strung up by his balls," Clayton told Lester and me, and this brand of vituperation was strident even for Clayton. He grumbled, standing over us in the precinct house that morning with his tie at half-mast and his shirt sleeves soaked with angry perspiration, "I don't believe it anyway. I can't fucking believe it."

Lester Hayashi was in addition to being a good cop and partner the most unruffled individual in the NYPD I'd ever come across, and he barely flinched at Clayton's histrionics. "I'll bet this is the first time Cap's ever looked at a blog," he muttered to me as Clayton turned to walk away. "They've only been around since the '90s."

I pretended to be as nonplussed as he was. It was probably just a matter of time before someone with the Times or someone with the department was able to trace "Suspicion" to me. That would bring about a slew of consequences, probably all of them unpleasant. So I should have stopped then and there. I didn't. Now. Those five short stories written but never published that I promised:

"Velvet."

"Street Song for Lonnie."

"The Under Cover Girl."

"Contact High."

"Blood on the Ledge."

This moment in my dream woke me up out of a sound sleep: Kit Harper, wearing a mischievous smile, pointing an index finger at me, her thumb skyward, and saying "Bang!" Then blowing invisible smoke over the top of her trigger finger. Then laughing.

Sitting up in bed, I struggled to get my bearings. I heard the thump and whine of a garbage truck three floors down and on the street. Barely discernible and coming from somewhere I couldn't pinpoint, I heard an echoed recording of a young Frank Sinatra singing something about *"I only want to be close to you."*

My phone, on the floor at my feet when I swung out of the bed, indicated that I'd received two text messages in the night. One at 2:18 a.m., the other half an hour later. Phone number unrecognizable. Not worth following up on.

An hour after I'd risen, Kit phoned.

"Hey," she said.

I didn't hesitate. "I just dreamed of you," I said back.

"That's flattering. Your subconscious likes me."

I didn't tell her what the image of that dream was. As I pondered a way forward, she changed subject, inviting me to go with her to an art gallery in the Village that afternoon.

I was relieved at the detour. "Sure. Who's the artist?"

"I'm not saying."

"Somebody I know?" This was a ludicrous question because even though she and I had met at MOMA, I was not an educated art person.

"I think so," Kit said. "See you around 2."

The Oiseaux Gallery on Bethune Street was busy when we arrived that afternoon. In a space as small as this one was, six people constituted a veritable crowd. Moving around on the slick hardwood floors to survey the artworks, the bottoms of their shoes tap-tapped over the acoustic guitar music playing from a boom box perched in a corner. There were two sculptures situated on pedestals in the center of the single-room gallery space, each a semblance of a human figure with one posed as the mirror opposite of the other. The three available walls were full. On one were hung small, square-shaped pen-and-ink drawings, the kind you'd have to get up close to and squint at to make out. On another, a series of portraits that all looked to be of the same subject: a woman with a long, oval face and dark pupil-less eyes, captured in various tilts of the head.

Kit strode immediately and with determination to the other wall, and I followed.

The four paintings in oil hung there in a crenellated pattern were abstracts, bursts of color – scarlet and green and a golden yellow – that might have been flowers that had exploded. But there was no violence in these images – they were bursts of color, yes, but bursts of joy. One, in which the paint had formed a kind of pinwheel, for some reason brought to mind childhood. I found them affecting in a way that I had not been at all by the other artwork in the gallery.

"Those," Kit said, pressing my elbow, "are mine."

Before I could react, she said: "What? You think my whole life is selling dresses at Saks?"

Before I could respond to that, the black-bearded man who I assumed was the owner of the gallery came up from behind us and began to gauge Kit's opinion about how he had hung her paintings. She quickly introduced me, but except for a polite nod he continued with his side of the painting-hanging conversation.

I stepped back, away from them both, and studied the four images further, again wondering why they'd evoked in me a childhood that didn't

want for happiness but did want for joy. Besides not knowing that Kit Harper was a painter, I didn't know anything about her childhood or whether that had something to do with what she'd expressed in oils. That probably was my projection.

But back to joy. That in life was unattainable for so many … maybe it depended on how you defined joy. I neither saw nor heard it very often. Where I traveled and what I did made joy seem prohibitive, sometimes impossible.

Part of me hesitated to share my interpretations with Kit; what if the notion of joy had absolutely nothing to do with her paintings?

With her still involved in the animated discussion with the gallery owner, I drew near to the images again and at last read the plaque glued to the wall to the right of them:

"LOVE, NOTHINGNESS AND ALL THE REST"

Works in oil by Kit Harper, 2023.

They danced, shackled, in six-inch steps one side to the other. Back and forth. In steady, dirty, rain.

She heard the martele of a violin.

He smelled cornflowers and sulfur.

They danced, until they could no longer feel the rain."

Kit, winding up her conversation with the gallery owner, seemed to sense that I'd just read this. She glanced toward me, her expression playful.

Then, from the rear of the gallery a spewing of slurred expletives startled the hushed visitors. A stooped man in open shirt, soiled trousers and bare feet staggered inside, his arms outstretched as if pleading. More cursing.

I recognized immediately that he wasn't armed and, like everyone in the gallery probably did, that he was drunk, high, delusional or all three. His

yellowish eyes, wide and unfocused, told me he had no idea where he was and likely no idea of what the hell he was doing.

The instant he took a step toward a couple frozen in fear by the sculpture works, I acted, clenching his now-flailing arms and securing them tightly behind him. He howled and cursed a fresh streak of blue. My foray had given him adrenaline, and he was more athletic than I'd suspected anyway for being slight and not very tall. Without handcuffs, I could only restrain him with all my own sheer strength.

"Call the police!" I cried out. In trying to keep his arms behind his back, we both went over, hard onto the gallery floor.

As I braced myself on top of him, flattening his limbs, I heard in my head: "Cornflowers and sulfur. Cornflowers and sulfur."

We'd gone to a movie later and as such had done very little talking all evening. There hadn't been any real conversation, either, as we walked back to Kit's place sometime after 10.

It was only after we'd collapsed together onto her couch, put both our feet up on the coffee table – "It's OK, it's old and beat up," she'd assured me – that she spoke to me about something other than the fairly forgettable film we'd just sat through.

She leaned against me, her head on my shoulder, her hands in her lap. "Do you like being a cop?"

I have to say that the question, which sounded more wistful than confrontational, didn't surprise me. "You mean because of today?"

"I mean because of every day."

She raised her head from my shoulder and we traded very serious expressions – at least that's how it seemed to me. "You're such a gentle man," Kit said. She pressed my arm. "I don't understand, Brian."

"How I could wrestle someone to the floor who was a threat to innocent people?" My response came off as more defensive than I'd intended.

She sat back on the couch, and I apologized. "I'm sorry, too," I added, "that this happened today. There in the gallery. When the afternoon should have been about you."

"I wanted it to be about us," she said, with some urgency.

"But …"

"I know. This wasn't anything you did. No one predicted that man would walk into the place like that. Somebody had to do something."

My actions hadn't been the only intrusion on the day at the gallery. Not long after I'd pinned the intruder to the floor, an NYPD car screeched up to the curb, two uniformed officers entered, relieved me of the man's custody, and, with the guy coherently accusing me of "pig brutality," marched him through the door and to the waiting unit, its rooftop light blinking furiously and reflected in the gallery's storefront window glass.

Gallery business broke up almost immediately, leaving Kit and me alone in the awkward, upsetting aftermath.

Kit pulled her legs up onto the couch and twisted around to face me directly. "Has anyone," she asked, "ever tried to shoot you?"

I swallowed. "Yes. It's happened."

"And they didn't …"

"No. I've never been hit. Or wounded."

I knew what the next question would be: Have you ever shot anyone? Wounded someone else? Worse?

During my foredoomed relationship with Julie James, these were the precursors to her breaking off our relationship. The "did you evers" and "how could you's."

I didn't expect Kit to say what she next said.

"Hey, it's your gig," she said with a little shoulder shrug. "Remember? The first time I saw you, at the museum, you'd just finished arresting some

guy. Cop doing his job. Checking out art while he was there. I didn't judge. I DON'T judge."

She sat forward on the couch and lifted her glass of wine. "Seeing you spring into action may take some getting used to, I'll admit."

I was determined not to make this an "encounter" or an ultimatum. I took up my own glass of wine. "Does that mean," I said, "you plan on sticking around?"

She clinked our glasses together. "Never a dull minute with you, Brian Marsh."

I didn't drink as she started to. "Kit. I mean it. You're going to be OK with this?"

"I said I was."

"Really," I pressed.

Her cat, Otis, jumped up on the back of the couch and purred.

Kit took my glass from me, set both back on the coffee table. Then she placed her hands on either side of my face. "I like you," she said, meeting my eyes with hers. "I like being with you. Do you believe me?"

"Of course. The feeling's more than mutual."

Her lips curled into a smile. "Meaning?"

I didn't say it. I think I wanted to.

A pause.

Kit's large eyes were now a little moist. She pulled me close to her. "It's OK, darling. I'm a painter," she said. "I don't need words." She kissed me and I tasted cabernet and courage in the kiss.

Rock Dreyfus, senior detective at our precinct, had chosen the Monkey Bar at the Hotel Elysee on East 54th for his engagement party. It wasn't a bachelor party – Rock made that very clear when he spread the word in the squad

room and spread it to both male and female officers. "Sandy will be there," he assured everyone. His fiancée.

I didn't know that "Rocker," as we called him, had so many friends. The place was packed. Noisy and packed. Booze flowing. Laughter resounding. Shoulders crushed together. Drinks ever in danger of spilling down someone's neck. I recognized four or five people from the precinct including a couple of usually undercover cops who were partners and who qualified as the most … let's just say "eccentric" … in our ranks: Barrel-chested and red-bearded Hippie Mike McGraw as he was called was ex-Army with three ex-wives and he was a devoted pot smoker off the job; Vinnie Paltrow, who considered himself the "Prince of Leather" (or "leatha" as he pronounced it) viewed himself as a throwback to the streetwise '50s cop, though his liberal use of profanity was up to date with 2024 standards. These two, although decidedly dressed down compared to most of the revelers, were doing most of the heavy lifting of alcohol.

It was rare that members of our precinct did any socializing together. Lester Hayashi, beside me in the crush of celebrants, remarked as much. "I suppose," he said, simultaneously trying to keep his aside tactfully soft and to make himself heard by me, "it takes somebody getting married, or at least engaged."

Les wasn't engaged, but was as close to it as possible. He'd been in a relationship with a Japanese-American nutritionist at Columbia for at least a couple of years. Though we were partners and friends and had discussed "double-dating" many times, it'd never happened. I'd met the woman once, almost by accident, outside the precinct house.

I hadn't told Les anything about Kit Harper, but he suspected I'd been seeing someone. The questions he asked me about my weekends – when we HAD weekends – always carried with them the implication that I hadn't spent mine alone, as I had done so many times since we'd known each other.

When the tumult inside the Monkey Bar abated enough that we could converse comfortably, and after we'd given Rocker and Sandy our best wishes,

I asked Lester about the nutritionist and clumsily attempted a quip about his being "next."

"Unless you beat me to it," he replied tonelessly and immediately.

I didn't confide in him until we stepped outside a few moments later. Les wanted a smoke and I wanted air other than the humid and boozy kind that we left behind inside the Monkey Bar.

It had begun to drizzle, not real rain. Just enough mist to dampen my hair and the back of my neck and bead on the shoulders of my topcoat.

Lester, smoking, seemed to be ignoring it.

"Her name's Kit," I began. I didn't say anything else.

Les dropped the cigarette at his feet, stomped it out and pulled the collar of his jacket around his neck as he faced me. "I knew there was somebody," he said.

I dove my hands into my coat pockets. "This is going to sound, I don't know, silly maybe, but I'm crazy about her."

"Nothing silly about it," he pronounced. "You're talking good crazy." At that instant, two male voices loudly berating each other could be heard across the street in front of an Italian restaurant. Les indicated them with a thumb. "As opposed to bad crazy."

I told him what little I knew about Kit and how much more I wanted to know about her, and that only took a few minutes. I spoke more rapidly than I usually do and I must have sounded manic or at least anxious. I caught my breath and looked at Les. He'd taken this jag in with his typical forbearance and patience. Then he grinned, a quick but significant grin. "Good for you, brother."

Vinnie Paltrow poked his head outside and beckoned us back in, slurring something about "spiked cupcakes."

I detained Lester by the elbow.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"How does your friend … "

"Nari?"

"Yes. Nari. How does she feel about your being a cop?"

He grinned again. "Sometimes she thinks I'm trying to be this macho super cop. You know, pretending I'm big and bad."

"Which you're neither."

"Which I'm neither." He pulled out a fresh cigarette but didn't light it. "Then there are times she thinks I'm *baaad*. You know what I mean?"

"Sure."

He produced a plastic lighter from his inside coat pocket. "But most of the time," he said, "I think she wishes I'd quit and go teach criminology at NYU. Something safer."

"She worries about you?"

"A little." He lit the new cigarette. "That's OK, I worry about her too. She rides the subway alone everywhere. Walks around after dark. Talks to just about anybody. She's fearless. It can be dangerous to be fearless, right?"

"I guess it can be."

He exhaled smoke away from me. "And this Kit? She knows you're a cop?"

"Of course she knows," I said. "She knew the moment we met. I was busting that little forger, Sammy Lederer." I briefly recounted the encounter at MOMA.

"She's good with it," I finally offered.

Les nodded. "So you got nothing to worry about."

This time, Paltrow, Hippie Mike and two other partiers came out and cajoled us back inside the Monkey Bar. A piano player was providing keyboard backdrop to "Just the Way You Are." Rock Dreyfus and his intended were in the middle of the room, duetting with handheld microphones.

A car or truck backfired outside on East 54th and if any of us thought it was a gunshot no one hurried out to check. Not even I.

I dreamed of Kit again that night, but I wasn't in the dream. Instead, she was speaking to someone I didn't know. Speaking about me:

"Brian's not afraid of anything. And that's what scares me."

I called out to her in my sleep. Nothing.

When a call comes in about a "disturbance" somewhere, you know it's bound to be unpleasant. Human beings know how to disturb each other and their neighbors and the collective peace from decades of doing so.

A cop many years senior to me when I first hit the streets as a uniformed rookie once told me that with disturbance calls "You never know what you're walking into." It didn't get much more ominous than that. He was right, too. Once in a blue moon there'd be a false alarm or a minor skirmish to mediate, but all too commonly a disturbance was more than that, and ugly.

The front desk clerk who buzzed Les and me into the 17th Street residential hotel was high as the proverbial kite. Presiding in the unfurnished, peeling-paint lobby in a soiled Mets jersey top and reversed green ballcap, the guy peered at us with dilated pupils when we entered.

"Two-oh-seven," he grunted, obviously not caring that he was flying and we were cops.

Eschewing the ancient cage elevator, we took the stairs up a couple at a time in the near-darkness, our guns holstered and both of us surprisingly out of breath for being in our thirties. Must have been the odor of antiseptic, combined with stinking mold, that challenged us.

Three people congregated outside the door to 207 in a dingy corridor, including a woman in a shower cap and what they used to call a muumuu. Upon seeing us hastening down the hall she threw out a meaty arm and ordered us to "get the hell in there!"

At the door, once we'd stepped in between this woman and another neighbor, we could hear an argument inside and something made of glass breaking. To our surprise, the same Mrs. Muumuu grabbed the doorknob, shoved with one determined shoulder and open went the door without our even touching it.

So in we went.

The combatants had gone to opposite sides of the room. The man, frizzy-haired, bare-chested and barefooted, with jeans open at the waist, stood as if pinned against a peeling wall. Spittle dripped from his chin as he shouted first at the woman across the room sprawled over a chair, and then at us.

In spite of his bulk, Les was able to quickly get him into handcuffs and turned the other way around, facing the wall. His foul language turned from English into something I didn't recognize, but I was preoccupied with the other person in the room. She looked underfed and depleted, though I didn't see any immediately evident cuts or bruises on her face or arms. When I leaned over and told her who I was, her eyes rolled back in her head and she began sobbing out "This isn't love! This isn't love!"

Looking over his shoulder while restraining the man, Les asked if I was all right.

Before I could answer, the woman summoned a preternatural strength and sprung into my arms, wrapping her own around my waist and digging nails into my back.

"It's OK," I told her more than once. She was trembling.

Neighbors from out in the hall had entered and were gawking, one trying to explain to us that "Manny and Ash" did this all the time.

Did what all the time?

"Help me," the woman murmured against me. As I tried to get her to her feet, she spasmed and then vomited on both of us. Then she broke down completely.

"A SUSPICION OF BLUE" / Nov. 17, 2023

"This isn't love," she said.

What is? Law enforcement isn't love. It's doing the best you can when everything around you looks, seems and feels a little out of control. Sometimes a lot out of control. The common perception is that 'the bad guys' are pursued by 'the bad guys.' So why bother?

Because I care. I care about making a difference even if it's only one moment at a time. That's probably the best I can do: one moment at a time. One person at a time. One disaster at a time.

I know that might be hard for some of you to understand. Half the time I don't understand it myself."

Following up on the Times' report, the Daily News ran a blurb inside on Page 2 where curiosities were published, an item that stated that "An NYPD blogger is regularly beating his breast in writing about being a cop. Unless he/she/it spills the beans on some impropriety or insider corruption, are we supposed to give a damn?"

Nothing came down from Clayton or anyone else in the department, that I knew of, but after Oct. 17 I decided I'd go dark for a while. They were probably closing in.

Kit and I had made love until we were both exhausted. Already the faintest glimmer of light shone through the closed curtains over her bedroom window, and the telltale sign that dawn was near – the clamor of a garbage truck somewhere up the street – roused me from the half-sleep I'd been in.

When I opened my eyes and turned my head on the pillow, I was looking directly into her plaintive stare.

"Are you the blogger?" she asked.

I waited.

"Are you?" she asked again.

"What are you talking about?"

Her expression didn't change. "It's you, isn't it, Brian? The policeman in the paper. With the blog."

"Wait a minute."

"It's all right," she said, pressing her palm to my cheek. "Good the hell for you. There's just one thing I don't understand."

There wasn't any point denying it any longer. I leaned back on my elbows. "What don't you understand?"

"You told me," she said sitting up and pulling the sheets up over her breasts, then sweeping back hair from her face, "that you wanted to be a writer. You know, when you were growing up." She paused. "Is this it?"

I sat up myself. "Is what it? You mean the blog?"

"'A Suspicion of Blue,'" she said, and there was a dismissiveness in her voice when she did so. "Brian, like I said, I'm good with this, but is that what you want to write? Something short and sharp and anonymous like you were writing in a darkened room?"

I didn't know what to feel at this moment. Guilty? Defensive? Ashamed? Confused? A bit of all four?

"Or is this," she said, her voice softening, "your own private way of telling me what it's like? What you do every fucking day? What you go through?"

"No," I said, then "I don't know."

"Maybe you're writing this for the world."

I swung my feet out of bed. "Whatever," I said. "It's not going to last."

She put an arm around my shoulder. "Probably not." She touched her lips to my ear. "They'll find out and they'll make you stop. So why don't you write your novel instead? The Great Truths. The Great Dreams."

I drew my lips to hers. "The Great Love?"

"You can't mean me."

"I'm looking right at you."

"Is this your way of saying you love me?"

"I guess it is. Are you OK with that?"

We wrapped ourselves in each other's arms. "It's OK, baby," she said.

Everything was swimming around me. I knew I was lying flat on my back and was trying to make out the faces and the bodies standing over me. The side of my head hurt like hell and I felt something warm and wet on the side of my face.

"Can you get up?" I heard someone say, the voice muffled.

Things darkened. I didn't want to pass out, but I felt like I was seconds away from doing so. Only the pain kept me awake, alert.

"Hold on, Detective. We're getting help."

"Get these fucking people away from here."

"Anybody see where that guy went?"

"Jesus, don't just stand there. Do what I tell you to do!"

Someone pressed a linen cloth to my head. The throbbing worsened. I groaned.

"Take it easy, Brian." I heard Lester's voice and I managed to focus in on him kneeling beside me on cold, unforgiving asphalt. It was he who was holding the cloth to my head.

"What happened?"

"You're OK, man," Lester said. "We got bricks thrown at us. Hippie Mike and Rowland are chasing them now."

I gritted my teeth through the pain, which actually felt as if it were abating. "Bricks?"

"Missed me. Hit you," said Les, who through my vision looked like he was melting.

Missed me. Hit you. Missed me. Hit you.

Funny how I never thought about how blindingly bright the light bars were on the roof of police cars. They could brighten out the damned night if you stared at one long enough …

Instead of a night in the hospital, which I didn't want anyway, I got sent home with pills for headaches and instructions for keeping the stitches near my left temple dry and clean. Once there, I fell into my bed, still dressed, and slept, well into the next day until I got a call summoning me to Grant Clayton's office.

Clayton, for whom a growl was as good as a hello most days, must have concluded that because I had neither a concussion nor anything more serious than a few stitches, I was fit enough to be lambasted.

It had happened – the department figured out that "Suspicion" originated with me.

"I'm doing you a goddamned favor," Clayton spat inside his closed office. The ferocity in his eyes told me that he was not assuaged by the bandage hugging the left side of my head. "I'm handling this instead of somebody further up the line. You'd be looking at a suspension, maybe worse."

That was only the beginning. He made it clear, in language that was not unusual for him but with a few words that even hardened Marines might not have heard, that any writing I did about my job or the department was not for public consumption.

"What the fuck made you think this was all right anyway?" he grilled me.

"It was just a way," I said, "for me to let off a little steam."

"What goes on in this department is nobody's business but ours, Sergeant! What part of that do you not understand?"

I knew I had this coming and had very little defense. Clayton certainly didn't want to hear about my uncultivated writing career, but I told him anyway.

Predictably, he only bellowed all the louder.

"You want to be a writer, then be a goddamned writer, but get out of this department!" he pointed a fat finger at me. "You want to be a cop, then that's what you are. Period!"

Before I could say anything else, he shouted "Now get out of here!"

His secretary, Robin, gave me a sympathetic half-smile as I closed Clayton's office door behind me. She'd likely not been the only one in the outer office and adjoining squad room who'd heard every word the captain had said, at full-throated volume.

Now the question was whether Internal Affairs would want to deal with me next.

Les met me in the hallway after the tirade. "Let's get some air."

We walked in chilly noontime grayness all the way to Washington Square Park, stopping once at a vendor's booth en route to get paper cups of bad but welcome hot coffee. I experienced no residual dizziness from my assault the day before. In fact, the headaches had stopped, and my eyes and ears were clear.

Les muttered about what he deemed the casual medical attention I'd received most of the way to the park. An X-ray, a CT scan, a few threads of suture and out. "Pretty bullshitty," he'd said. The good news was that Hippie Mike and Bobby Rowland had caught up with the punks who'd been throwing bricks not only at us but at EMTs working just down the street. Real choirboys, they. Their motive? I hadn't heard.

A purple and white spinet piano had been wheeled into the park, and a lanky fellow in hoary straw hat and hoarier jacket sat before it on a tilted stool. Whatever he was playing had a ragtime feel to it, though there were discordant notes and starts and stops. None of this the tourists and New Yorkers walking around, like us, on their lunch hour appeared to care about or even notice.

Kids were playing tag around the Arch and squealing with delight in the playing. The cherry and crabapple trees at this time of year were virtually bare; the tulips gardens and the hyacinth sparse.

We found a place to sit far enough away from the spinet player, sipped at our steaming coffees.

"It's been a hell of a 24 hours," I finally said after we'd spent a couple of minutes in silence.

"Glad you're feeling better, Brian," said Les with a snort. "That was a bad break."

I tapped the bandage over my temple. "Could've been badder."

He pretended to laugh. "Course, then there's the captain."

"Yeah."

"I think he'd decided all along it was you, you know. "

"You think so?"

"Yeah. Now he's paranoid you're going to get him busted down to lieutenant."

I'd had enough of this coffee, hot though it was. I set it down beside me. "What about you, Les? Did you know it was me writing that blog?"

He smiled. "To be honest," he said, "I never even looked at it. Even after that thing in the newspaper. Sorry."

"Don't be." I clopped him on the arm. "I guess I convinced myself that no one I knew would read it."

"So why'd you write it?"

I shook my head and sighed. "I don't think I know that, either." I waited a moment. "Kit asked me the same thing."

His brow furrowed. "She knew about this?"

"Not until a couple of days ago. Like Clayton or whoever, she figured it out."

He pointed at my bandage. "Have you told her about that?"

I looked away, at the kids playing tag around the Arch. "No, not yet."

"Are you going to? I mean, you can't hide it, tell her you cut yourself shaving."

I was relieved he'd made a joke about it. This was no laughing matter, but in the wake of recent events I needed a laugh.

We didn't say anything else about it, the remaining five minutes we spent in the park or along the way back to the precinct house.

She'd said to me, "Hey, it's your gig," after I'd had to tackle an intruder at the Oiseaux Gallery. She'd told me she wasn't sentimental. She hadn't told me she was tough, she was street smart, she was New York. She didn't have to.

When I got home that night I sat down at my old desk and tried to write her a poem. I tried because I wanted to but also I knew that sometimes it's easier to write down your feelings than to say them, especially to someone you care about. Someone you love. The downside to that was that every word you wrote was overthought, or overwrought, or wrong. I must have torn up three false starts before I lay down on the couch, looked up at the stained ceiling above me and searched my weary thoughts for new, for better words.

Naturally, sadly, I fell asleep.

She'd been painting. The thin smock draped over her sweater and leg pants was dappled with colors from three oils; her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Opening the door, however, with a long paintbrush in one hand, she gave me a longer stare than I gave her.

Her eyes were on the bandage taped over and around my left temple.

"What the hell happened to you?" There was more curiosity than shock in her question.

"Can I come in?"

She widened the door. "Sure."

I proceeded to the easel she had set up by the draperied picture window that looked out on the narrow neighborhood street four floors below. The painting obviously was so early in the going that what it was or what it was going to be was unclear to me. Well, to my untrained eye.

From behind she poked my shoulder with the back end of the paintbrush.

I turned around. "Hi." I must have sounded sheepish.

"Hi," she said with that telltale suspicious tone that says "What's going on?"

"Had a little accident, Kit."

She folded her arms across her chest, another sign that she wasn't buying what I was feebly trying to sell. "Run into a wall? A high door?"

"It's not as bad as it looks," I said, tapping the bandage and suppressing a twinge that doing so elicited. "Les and I were ambushed by a couple of troublemakers."

"I see."

I circled behind her love seat of a couch where the cat was sleeping. "So how are you doing? Hope you don't mind my coming over without calling."

Expressionless, she tossed her paintbrush onto a crammed wooden worktable and began to untie the collar of the smock around her. "Can I ask you something, Brian?" she said in the untying.

"Sure."

"Were you afraid to come over here?" After folding the smock over one arm, she pointed toward my head. "Because of that?"

"If I was afraid," I said, "I wouldn't have come over, right? And anyway. Afraid of what?"

"Afraid," she said, standing behind the love seat, with the worn piece of furniture in between us, "that I'd be upset when I saw that."

I sighed, giving it up. "Maybe just a little."

Now she undid whatever was holding her hair in a ponytail. She looked, to me, as beautiful as the first night I'd seen her, at the museum. But there was a pallor in her skin and a tautness in her face that I hadn't seen before.

She did an about face and sat down on the love seat, facing the window. "I have to tell you, Brian. I'm … I'm really tired."

"I *should* have phoned first."

"That not what I mean."

She waited for me to come round and sit beside her.

When she covered my hands with her own, I felt a chill in my shoulders and down my back. I felt the numbness of disappointment coming.

"I care about you, Brian, you know I do," she said.

"But do you …"

"Yes, I love you. I have for a while now. It's just that I don't think I can be with you any longer."

"You love me," I said, now feeling her hand just barely perceptibly trembling over mine, "but you want to split up? Say goodbye?"

"I do."

I searched for tears in the hazel eyes I'd looked into so many times in the past few months. There were none, but neither was there confusion or disbelief. There was resolve.

"This doesn't make sense to me, Kit," I said, and I drew our hands apart. "It's the cop thing, I know, but …"

"It's NOT the cop thing, Brian." She stood, went to the window, looked out, and turned around again. "You are who you are and you are what you are. I've said that before."

I didn't believe her. I didn't believe her because I didn't want to consider an alternative explanation. Like by "tired" she meant tired of seeing me. Like someone else had come into her life.

She'd been talking while my mind had been racing, out of control.

" ... understand that this is who I am," was the first thing I heard when I'd snapped to. "This isn't some 'It's not you it's me' copout, Brian. I wouldn't insult your intelligence with something like that. But I do feel like we've got this ... disconnect."

"Kit ..."

"Yes, I'll admit that your arresting people while we're together and that blog and OK, whatever or whoever did that to you wasn't what I was counting on in a relationship. I get it."

Was this the opening where I was to swear that I could take care of myself, that I knew what I was doing, that the anxiety about this side of my life was understandable but it could be handled?

Again, I'd thought through what she was saying ...

" ... Can you give me that, Brian?"

I'd missed what "that" was. Reassurance that all would be well, that she had nothing to fear?

"No answer?"

How could I tell her that I'd been absorbed in my own doubts and pain, that I hadn't been listening like someone who claimed to love her with such depth of feeling should have been?

I tried to cover up, though I meant each word when I said: "I can give you whatever you want, Kit."

She moved toward me, clutched my hands. "Your eyes are wet," she said, looking up at me solemnly.

I don't know why I said it but I did: "Yours aren't."

When I finally fell asleep that night, alone, in my own bed, I'd done so thinking as I slipped into unconsciousness, my bandaged side pressed into a pillow, about the name of her exhibition at the gallery: "LOVE, NOTHINGNESS

AND ALL THE REST." She'd prioritized "love" in the title. "All the rest" had come between us. "Nothingness" felt like now.

It was inevitable when I received a summons from an Internal Affairs review board. The subject was the blog I had written without sanction or permission. I suspected that the session was going to be about much more than that.

Clayton received permission to sit in on the hearing though he was not allowed to say anything in my defense or otherwise. I appreciated his being there, even though he hesitated to make eye contact with me across the room.

A board of five I.A. administrators, one of them in dress uniform the others in gray or blue suits, occupied the rectangular table in the interrogation room. I sat among them. Clayton and an attorney for the department taking notes observed from chairs against the wall.

I was made to understood in short order, with no time consumed by preliminary niceties, that officers were forbidden from posting identifiable content or anything having to do with police business on social media. This was only tangentially related to what I was in Dutch for.

It was acknowledged that an officer maintaining a blog wasn't in and of itself a violation of department policy, but that first of all, I should have identified myself and second, I was in no way allowed to refer to any specific cases or enforcement actions taken by anyone with the NYPD myself included.

Since I had not done that, had not named anyone specifically, had not given details of any one explicit case or incident, I was guilty – though that word wasn't used – only of "rogue behavior." Not disclosing this online activity to my superior was wrong – no two ways about it.

After 15 minutes I was asked to speak.

I began with a question: "If I identify myself and abide by all the other stipulations you outlined, may I resume the blog?"

"Why?" I was asked immediately and tersely.

"Because," I said, "I am a cop. But I also am a writer." As I said this, I realized that it sounded pretentious. And I recalled the captain insinuating that I could not be both of these. But when I scrutinized the faces all focused on me in the clinical conference room, I saw a recognition that they understood what I was saying, far more than I would have expected them to. I'd come to the session fearing a dressing down, a possible suspension and certainly a note on my permanent record.

Maybe this was my chance to avoid everything, naïve as that sounded.

"I want everyone in this room to know," I said, "that though some of what I've written in 'A Suspicion of Blue' may have created the impression that I am unhappy in or disillusioned by my work with the department, that's not true. Yes, sometimes it can be discouraging work. We all know that. But it means something. Something important. Or I wouldn't be doing it. I still believe, profoundly, that I can in some small way make a difference. Make this city that I care about better."

It had crossed my mind to point out that cops had written about being cops for decades. Hadn't any of them ever read Joe Wambaugh? Or Michael Cover?

Instead I apologized for not being transparent with the blog, and I was taken to task by the lieutenant heading up the review board. Then the one gray-suited cop who'd said absolutely nothing the entire time, a hefty man of maybe 50 with tanned skin, a durable jaw and small but intense green eyes, cleared his throat, and everyone turned to him with clear respect.

"I understand your sentiments, Sergeant," he said, cupping his hands on the table, "and they do you credit. So does your idealism. And yes, I have read Joe Wambaugh." He seemed to stop, staring at me for a reaction, but I gave him none.

"This is a discouraging business of ours," he then resumed. "And if you haven't already discovered the fact, it can take its toll. First on the body," he said, pressing his lapel. "And then the heart."

He cleared his throat again. "If putting that down in words does you helpful self-therapy then I have no complaint about it. As long as you don't speak for all of us, then that's all right as well." He made eye contact with his colleagues around the table, then riveted on me again. "I read what you wrote before and I promise you, I will read whatever you write again. And I personally will let you know when in my view you've breached security of your fellow officers or your fellow citizens. I hope it never comes to that. If it does you will open yourself up to very serious consequences."

It was the last word spoken in the hearing.

They all adjourned for only 10 minutes, during which time I sat in the hall outside with Clayton on one side of me and the department attorney on the other, still scribbling notes, in silence.

When we reconvened, I was told that my insubordination would be noted on my record, but that there would be no suspension and that if I adhered to the parameters laid out to me I could if I chose resume the blog in some sense. They only asked that I change the name and let a significant amount of time go by so that any publicity it had already received would recede or disappear.

"After that," one of the administrators said stonily, "no one will care."

I cared. I got out of this without being too badly scratched and afterward Clayton, though frowning, shook my hand quickly.

It was Lester, about an hour later at the precinct, who took me aside, out of anyone's earshot. He was not surprised that I had avoided a suspension or that I was given the greenlight to resume the blog in some form if I chose to.

"Someone inside the department's all for your blog, Brian," he said. "Someone who has sway with Internal Affairs."

"All for it how?"

"Just the scuttlebutt," he said, his low voice turning almost to a whisper. "There's a feeling that your blog humanizes us cops. Makes us sound more like real people. You know?"

"You're kidding."

"Would I kid about this?" He gave my shoulder a hard pat. "You're a ground breaker, brother, and as long as you don't write something completely unflattering about the NYPD you can be a star in the blog-o-verse."

"I don't want to be a star in the 'blog-o-verse.'"

He laughed. "Maybe not. But you have to admit: this turned out better than you thought it would."

He was right there. So why did I feel like I'd been hit over the head with another brick?

I did not reinvent "A Suspicion of Blue." And that cop in the review board meeting was correct: with the blog out of commission, neither Jacqueline somebody nor anyone else, media-wise, mentioned it again.

With the arrival of the holiday season, I missed Kit Harper even more than before. I hadn't heard a word from her and each time – and there were more than a few – that I reached for the phone, steeled my nerves to call and just take my chances, I talked myself out of it; and then I beat myself up for not trying.

Being the razor-sharp fellow that he was, it didn't take long for Lester Hayashi to figure out that my relationship had ended, and like the friend that he was, he tried to distract me with first, after-work nights of handball, then a double date. The woman he and Nari had picked out for me, a friend of hers from California who was just in town visiting ("so no commitment pressure!" Les reminded me), was pleasant and pretty and obviously aware of the fix-up and that I was coming out of a breakup. She did her best to be the good fourth and even to flirt with me, and I did my best to try and pretend it was "just" another double-date.

Neither of us could pull it off, and after that flop, Les and Nari retired from the fix-up business.

Rather than looking for someone to fill the void left in my emotional life, I decided to throw my energies into something else, not as important but worthwhile just the same: I would study and take the exam to become a lieutenant. I was eligible, and though Clayton was noncommittal about my chances given the blotch on my sergeant's record, he encouraged me to pursue the promotion.

I studied like hell through and beyond the holidays, alone in my apartment, quizzing myself, making notes, inventing memory games about policy and protocol, and considering possible police scenarios that might come up on the exam. In truth, between the studying and my work, I turned into a virtual loner. Even Mr. Maggio remarked one winter morning upon seeing me that "You don't seem the same, Mr. Police Man."

The truth was, what I was gaining in practical knowledge I was sacrificing in human connection, and I began to miss that part of myself. Writing, which I still had not resumed in any way, shape or form, would not be enough.

And then I got shot.

Clayton sent Lester and me and two other detectives to the scene of a barricade situation, the police action equivalent of a powder keg with a short, burning fuse. The perp inside was armed with an M14 rifle, with which he'd already shot out the windshields of four blue-and-white Mustang Mach-E police cars. Inside was someone he'd killed, and it was unclear who by the time we got there. Presumably the man was alone now and armed and willing to shoot until he ran out of ammo before he'd allow himself to be taken.

A Detective Rosarena was on the bullhorn, standing in the cover of a police SUV, urging the man inside to come out unarmed and drawing intermittent fire from a front window of the ramshackle rowhouse for his trouble.

We were told that a Special Operations team was minutes away, which only meant that officers with more firepower than we had would be ready to rush the house and blow away anything or anyone in their path.

I crouched beside Les as close to the line of fire as we dared in our protective vests, using police combat shields as if they were armored plates. I didn't know about Lester, but I felt vulnerable as hell and each time a shot was fired from the house it seemed to resound closer and closer to us.

Rosarena shouted something unintelligible through his bullhorn just as the special op vehicle thundered up behind us all.

"Out of the fuckin' way!" I then heard him shout at us.

We both stood up.

What happened? All I remember was falling. All I felt was something stabbing me in the side.

Jesus, where did everyone go?

Can you hear me?

Can somebody hear me?

This wasn't like the brick, this was nothing like that brick.

I don't think I can breathe. I don't think I can see.

Help, somebody. I don't want to be alone like this.

"AND THEN THE HEART" / Oct. 8, 2024

Hello, New York, or anyone else who's reading. I'm coming clean this time. I don't pretend to be coy or mysterious or anonymous. Everybody who NEEDS to know what I'm up to knows, so we're cool, we're practically legitimate.

It's Fall. I'm reminded, as many of us are, of "Autumn Leaves" and Nat Cole and something forlorn playing over the traffic and jackhammers and human noise of The City:

'The falling leaves drift by the window
The autumn leaves of red and gold
I see your lips, the summer kisses
The sun-burned hands I used to hold

Since you went away the days grow long
And soon I'll hear old winter's song
But I miss you most of all my darling
When autumn leaves start to fall …'

It's been awhile, friends. Three or four seasons. I've been away. I've been wounded in action – shot just below the left shoulder. I've been promoted. I've been sanctioned, so here I am. Reborn but with the acknowledgement if not the blessing of the New York Police Department.

I've been reborn too.

Your faithful servant and scribe, now renamed:

Brian Slick, lieutenant detective, NYPD."

This is what moving up means, right? Not exactly crowd control at the Columbus Day Parade, but keeping my eyes peeled for dealers, who'd been reported at the previous year's event and, much to the mayor's loudly voiced chagrin, had gone un-busted.

Trying to inconspicuously spot a drug dealer in a crowd of 30,000 lining Fifth Avenue is not a one-person job. I had confederates concealed all along the route from 44th to 72nd; we had small but effective two-way radios to stay in touch.

I was hoping to move to the park before too much time went by. Seemed to be a much more likely spot for trouble. It always was.

Two marching bands in nearly identical red and white uniforms had gone blaring and drumming by when, as the noise abated, I felt a pat from behind on my shoulder.

I turned around.

Kit.

"Brian … Slick?" she inquired, and there was mischief in her big eyes that I hadn't forgotten. She was dressed for the chill of the autumn Monday

In a woolen double-breasted coat and gloves, with a black cuffed knit hat over her hair.

"Kit Harper," I said, less a question than an affirmation.

"The one and the same," she said with a little bow, and her hat nearly fell off. "But you," she added, righting herself, "you're not."

I was so startled and so thrilled to see her that I didn't feel up to playful banter, even though we'd once been very good at it together.

I felt my two-way radio buzz in the inside pocket of my topcoat, but I chose to ignore it. Seeing Kit for the first time in a year and I'd start out by tending to police business in her presence … again?

So I took a chance and opened my arms to welcome her into them.

She went.

"I'm really the same guy," I said, feeling her warm body against mine on this brisk parade day.

"Same guy, new name, Lieutenant?" she murmured into my chest. "Is that what you're saying?"

The arrival of the next marching band, this one mostly in sync as its members blasted "New York New York" drowned out whatever I might have said next.

We settled onto a park bench at Cherry Hill with a view of the lake and welcome distance from the crowds on the grass either through with or taking a break from what remained of the Columbus Day Parade.

I'd gone off duty and told them so.

I also told Kit, slowly and what I hoped was sincerely, about having been shot in a barricade situation, having recovered and undeservedly, I thought, been moved up in line for promotion. Having been transferred to narco and gone undercover. Having been dubbed "Slick" by my new captain

and having decided, after I'd left that duty, that for some reason I wanted the name to stay.

And having, amid ALL THAT, been lonely.

She'd listened mostly without a word, without visible reaction but for a catch in her breath when I recounted being wounded in that barricade shooting. For a second her gloved hand moved to her lower lip.

Then she told me. About having quit Saks and gone to work for the Oiseaux Gallery. Having started taking night classes in studio art and art therapy at NYU. Having, in spite of working in an art gallery and studying art after dark, been unable to paint as much as she'd used to.

But true to herself and the Kit that I knew, she didn't sound rueful or impatient with herself. She was philosophical.

"Everything in time, you know?"

Fifteen minutes went by and we hadn't talked about "us." With the parade having ended, the crowds on the grass gave way to regular Monday afternoon Manhattan office workers enjoying a late lunch or getting some exercise before they returned to their board rooms or cubicles.

Kit noticed me watching them.

"On the lookout for lawbreakers, Lieutenant Slick?"

I apologized. I wasn't doing that at all, but I wanted to keep all my attention on this woman.

"I've really missed you, Kit," I told her.

She touched my face and smoothed the beard I'd grown and worn for almost as long as we'd been apart. "I like this," she said. "And I've really missed *you*."

Before I could speak my heart any further, and I was out of practice, she leaned into me and kissed my lips.

"Listen," she said, keeping her voice low but resolute, "and understand me, OK?"

"All right."

Her gloved hand found the back of my neck and her face was now very close to mine. "I want to be your lover, Brian. I want to be your girlfriend." She paused. "But I don't want to be your wife."

"Because …?"

"I think you know why." She kissed me again then edged back along her side of the little green bench. "I love you."

We held each other for a long while, or at least until the buzzing radio in my coat pocket made it impossible to do so for the forever that I craved.

EPILOGUE

I'd been sitting at my desk, pondering over the blank screen on my laptop computer, when I heard what sounded like the padding of bare feet along a hardwood floor. My hardwood floor.

Nothing there.

The weather that very early morning, probably 2 or 3, had been nasty. Sheets of rain that strafed the closed window panes. A persistent wind's temper. Not the kind of storm that one escaped into a cozy bed to, there to fall asleep with the sheer comfort of being safe from the elements or worse.

But I must have nodded off at the desk, because I opened my eyes and realized I had my forehead on the keyboard and had typed a string of indecipherable letters and characters. My neck ached, too, from the awkward posture.

So I straightened up and massaged it with my right hand, exhaled.

I heard that padding on the floor again.

"Jesus!" I'd turned around. A petite, ashen-faced woman with wayward hair as black as the ripped dress wrapped around her stared at me in the barely

illuminated darkness. Who was she and how the hell had she gotten into my flat? I almost fell out of my desk chair.

Her bloodless lips parted. "Dance?"

This a dream. The only possible reconciliation of the moment. I was still asleep … and dreaming.

"Dance?" she asked again.

The next thing I knew I was on my feet, I had my arms around her small waist, the refrigerated fear I'd felt upon first seeing her had gone, and we were moving, together as one, around the room, while she sing-song sang:

"A policeman is our friend you know
He does what most won't do,
His job is to protect the weak
And sometimes me and you.

"Law and order isn't fun
It's nothing like romance,
A policeman's work is never done
Until his time … to dance."

I sat up at the desk, my head dizzy and my mouth dry.

She was gone.

My phone, on the floor near my feet, reported in text and white light a message received presumably while I'd been asleep or dreaming or both.

From Kit Harper:

"'Even in winter it shall be green in my heart.' Your friend Chopin said that. And I know the feeling."

It was too late, or too early depending on how you looked at it, to call. I wasn't one to text hearts. Or smiley faces. Or a row of little red hearts.

"I love you too," I said aloud and lay the phone on my desk.

I'd visit her in the morning. Maybe we'd talk. Maybe we'd make love. Maybe we'd dance.

VALUE, a play in one act

Characters

REGAN WINDSOR, about 35, a reporter for a prestigious New York-based news magazine

MADELEINE BARR, 63, a distinguished poet and scholar

ROBERT MARLOWE, 30, Regan's lover, an aspiring painter

Setting: New York City

Time: Fall, 2021 with the 20-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks approaching

SCENE 1: *A stage in blackness with just a spotlight on the lone figure occupying the center of the stage.*

A voice is heard offstage:

UNSEEN FEMALE'S VOICE
Ladies and gentlemen, the poet laureate of the United States, Madeleine H. Barr.

The woman onstage, behind a podium, speaks.

MADELEINE
"The Cry Room."

MADELEINE (*now reciting*)

"In the small, square room with its crystalline wall of soundproof glass
Those too young to know the sacred mysteries, those without
Words to pray and sins to confess, those with hearts still unblemished
Sit. And wait. And cry.

"Wrapped in blankets and lulled toward sleep
in the safe embrace of their mothers
They are comforted into acquiescence, while in
the great cavernous citadel of sanctimony
The blessings upon those who could speak,
who had sinned, are bestowed.

"On the other side of the glass wall, the supplicants
Whisper their entreaties and their regrets
While the solemn bells peal and the black smoke of benediction
Rises high above the bowed heads and
ice-blue jars of flickering candles
Lit for those who will cry no longer.

"They ask, as one, for forgiveness, for refuge and recompense
For steeliness against temptation and repeat offense, and for the gifts
Of strength and temperance."

A moment's silence precedes the sound of respectful audience applause.

MADELEINE

Thank you for your kind welcome. It is my privilege to stand here this evening, not only in this spotlight, but in the enduring after-light of those who have preceded me. And in particular, the women who have paved the way for me. Mona Van Duyn. Rita Dove. Louise Gluck. Kay Ryan. Natasha Trethewey. Tracy Smith. Joy Harjo.

You may be wondering why I chose to recite a poem of mine titled "The Cry Room" on this wonderfully happy occasion. I believe that Charles Dickens, in "Great Expectations," expressed it most eloquently:

"Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts. I was better after I had cried, than before – more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle."

Those words of Dickens' as you just heard conclude with an allusion to gentility. As I … as we confront the darknesses that sometimes encircle our lives, we look to our gentler selves for comfort and for means of comforting others.

As for the tears? We shed them sometimes because we must.

Again. I thank you and promise I will be worthy of your faith in me.

The lights FADE TO BLACK as we hear more APPLAUSE.

SCENE

SCENE 2: *A strictly functional studio apartment on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village*

TIME: The middle of the night

A newscaster's voice is heard in the darkness:

RECORDED VOICE OF VINCE CELLINI, CNN ANCHOR
"It's obvious something devastating has happened. And again, there are unconfirmed reports that a plane has crashed into one of the towers there. We are efforting more information on the subject as it becomes available to you …"

The news report fades away into white noise only to be replaced by the echoing sound of REGAN singing, a capella, the Beatles' "Cry Baby Cry":

REGAN's VOICE
"Cry baby cry / make your mother sigh / She's old enough to know better / So cry baby cry …"

AT RISE:
We see a full-size bed; the rest of the room remains in darkness. Two figures are lying beneath the rumpled sheets and a worn blanket. After a few beats, we hear REGAN scream. One of the figures, recognizable only by long tresses of dark hair, sits up in bed with a jolt. Almost immediately the other sleeping figure sits up, and when he turns on a lamp situated SR we see REGAN and ROBERT

REGAN
Oh my God.

ROBERT
Regan, are you all right? What's the matter?

REGAN *(catching her breath)*
I don't know, I … I just had this dream.

ROBERT (sitting up too)
Dream, or nightmare?

REGAN *(massaging her brow)*
I'm not sure. Jesus.

(ROBERT wraps an arm around her shoulder and draws her closer to him)

ROBERT
It's over now. You're OK.

REGAN *(easing away)*
Do I look like I'm OK? Do I sound like I'm OK? Just give me a minute to clear my head.

ROBERT
All right. All right. *(After a pause.)* You want to tell me about it?

REGAN
Robby, I don't even know why this scared me.

ROBERT
What scared you?

(REGAN leans back against the headboard, musses hair from her forehead; she is composed now)

REGAN
I heard this explosion. Then it was like I was out of my own body. Then …

ROBERT
Then what?

REGAN
There was this young man's voice. Speaking almost in a whisper.

ROBERT
You couldn't see him?

REGAN
No. I only heard.

ROBERT
What did he say?

(REGAN pulls her feet out from beneath the blankets, swings them over the side of the bed where she sits, facing the wall.)

REGAN
He said: "I'm falling."

ROBERT
Is that all? What else did he say?

REGAN
That's all.

ROBERT
Well, why did that upset you? What did it mean?

REGAN
It means he was dead.

ROBERT
Dead?

REGAN
Yes. Dead.

ROBERT
But this wasn't a voice you recognized?

REGAN (*shaking her head*)
No. It doesn't make sense. You don't have to tell me that. But it just frightened the hell out of me.

(*ROBERT smooths her hair with the fingers of one hand*)

ROBERT
Try to forget it. It's the middle of the night, Ray. Do you think you can get back to sleep?

REGAN
Just like that?

ROBERT
Well no, not "just like that," but …

REGAN
To hell with you.

(*She starts to bolt from the bed, but he detains her by the shoulders.*)

ROBERT
Regan. Wait a minute.

REGAN
Weren't you listening to what I said, Robby? About death.

ROBERT
Sure I was listening. But it was only a dream, Ray, and you're not even sure yourself why it scared you.

REGAN (*after a pause*)
Maybe not.

ROBERT
Look, we had a pretty nasty argument last night before we went to bed. It might have had something to do with this. If you want to talk …

REGAN
I'm tired of talking. I'm tired of arguing. I just need to sleep.

ROBERT
Okay.

REGAN
And it really doesn't matter who I heard. It was a dream.

(REGAN gets under the blankets again, but does not lie down.)

ROBERT (*reaching over her for the lamp*)
That's right. It was just a dream.

REGAN
Robby?

(*He does not turn off the light*)

REGAN
Sometimes in this job of mine I see things I probably shouldn't see. Hear things I probably shouldn't hear. And when I do, I think that maybe I fucked up from the very beginning..

ROBERT
What do you mean? Fucked up how?

REGAN
Choosing this life. This job.

ROBERT
You don't mean that.

REGAN
I don't know if I do or not.

ROBERT (*falling back onto the bed*)
Come on. Let's go back to sleep.

REGAN (*exhaling*)
I suppose so. I've got an important interview tomorrow.

ROBERT
Then you need your rest.

(*REGAN drops back onto the bed as well; the two lie side by side, the light still on; ROBERT watches her; she stares straight ahead*)

REGAN
I wonder why he said he was falling.

ROBERT
Try to sleep, Regan.

REGAN
You know the leaves on the trees here? In the city? They can be beautiful. In autumn. When they turn. The alchemy of the seasons, you know. Then they fall.

ROBERT
You're a poet.

REGAN
Not really.

(She sinks down onto the bed. ROBERT tries to embrace her; but remaining very still, she resists)

REGAN
Robby?

ROBERT
What is it?

REGAN
You know the only piece of advice I ever got that was worth a good goddamn? "There's no crying in journalism."

(*REGAN reaches over and turns off the lamp*)

SCENE

SCENE 3: *A 10th-floor brownstone flat on New York City's Upper East Side.*

TIME: The next evening, around 6 p.m.

The stage is in darkness. A voice is heard– it is MADELEINE BARR's – and a spot illuminates her face in seconds as she stands alone in the middle of the stage

MADELEINE *(reciting her poem):*

"Lightly, lightly, sung in the timid tune of a gray day
Left over from another crippled winter.
Filled with despair, but plied with hope beyond hope
For the peace of finding what was lost
Without so much as an unceremonious sigh."

The stage darkens, then gradually illuminates again, revealing a split set: SR is a living room tastefully furnished in rather old-fashioned pieces: dark wood, heavy cushions, dim lamps in ornate shades. A love seat-sized couch with a low coffee table in front of it is situated in the middle, with an armchair flanked by a lowboy and a lamp clearly positioned for reading to the side. A picture window with a view of the park is nearly in darkness. Bookshelves packed with tomes of literature and related academia consume most of the wall space behind the couch. An occasional table on the other side of the love seat contains a small glass vase of nondescript flowers. From an old phonograph machine behind the sofa, the strains of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" is heard.

SL and separated by a closed door is a walnut half tester bed with a canopy projecting from the posts at the head and extending only a couple of feet. The bedding has been opened though is still tautly tucked, suggesting that it is ready for use when needed. To the side of the bed is a round night table adorned with a single framed photograph leaning on an easel.

A buzzer sounds at the door, SR. MADELEINE, a mature woman of dignity and calm, studied demeanor, crosses from the bedroom, turns down the volume on the phonograph, proceeds to the door and opens it.

UNSEEN VOICE OF REGAN
Good evening. Ms. Barr?

MADELEINE
Yes. I'm Madeleine Barr.

REGAN
I'm Regan Windsor. From New Amsterdam Magazine. I'm here for our interview?

MADELEINE
Oh yes. Come in, Ms. Windsor. I've been expecting you.

(REGAN, smartly dressed and striding with quiet confidence, enters.)

MADELEINE
You'll have to forgive the mess around here. I'm doing my spring cleaning, you might say.

REGAN
In September?

MADELEINE
It's been a busy year. I'm just getting around to it.

REGAN
Of course. Speaking of busy, I'm sure you are, and I want you to know I appreciate very much the time you're giving me.

MADELEINE
Not at all. Would you like a cup of tea? Perhaps a drink?

REGAN
Thank you, but no.

MADELEINE (*moving to the armchair and sitting down*)
I have my jasmine tea here. It's an evening ritual of mine. I've been drinking jasmine tea at 6 almost every evening for 15 years. It's my only vice.

REGAN
I've never thought of hot tea as a vice.

MADELEINE
It is when it's taking the place of sherry. My uh … former every-evening-at-6 drink.

REGAN
I see.

MADELEINE
Don't pretend to look so surprised, Ms. Windsor. You're a reporter, I'm sure you've done your homework on me. You know that I famously gave up drinking owing to a well, a problem with it. But please. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. Sit down.

(REGAN sinks into the center of the couch, For a moment, the two women eye each other in silence. Then REGAN gets busy arranging her pen and steno pad in the lap of her skirt.)

REGAN
I'm not uncomfortable in the least, Ms. Barr. As a matter of fact …

MADELEINE
You may call me Madeleine.

REGAN
Oh. All right. Thank you. Madeleine. Before we begin, I want you to know I'm a great admirer of your poetry.

MADELEINE
Are reporters permitted to say such things?

REGAN
Why not?

MADELEINE
I understood that you were to remain inviolately objective, or something of that nature.

REGAN
Reporters are permitted to have their feelings, their likes and dislikes, as anyone else would. Provided they are expressed outside of their stories.

MADELEINE
That sounds almost official.

REGAN
I beg your pardon?

MADELEINE (*unfazed*)
Like it was written down somewhere. Are you certain you wouldn't like some tea?

REGAN
Very certain. Thank you.

(REGAN clicks open her pen, folds over a page in the steno pad. She is ready to begin.

(A cell phone, sitting on an occasional table across the room, buzzes. MADELEINE stands.)

MADELEINE
I apologize, Ms. Windsor. I didn't think to silence that.

REGAN
Go ahead and pick up if you like. I'll wait.

MADELEINE
No, of course not. That would be rude. I've promised this time to you.

(She goes over, examines the phone for a second, adjusts it and starts back toward her chair.)

MADELEINE (*sitting again*)
Now. Where were we?

REGAN
We haven't really started..

MADELEINE
Then let's begin.

REGAN
Now. Madeleine. You were poet laureate of the United States until this past May. How did you …

MADELEINE
Excuse me, are you recording our conversation?

REGAN
No. I don't use a recorder.

MADELEINE
Good. I loathe them. They make me feel as if I were delivering a speech. Yes, I was poet laureate. Appointed by the Librarian of Congress. That's Carla Hayden.

REGAN
Yes. I know.

MADELEINE
Mona Van Duyn, one of our past poet laureates, was a mentor of mine at Washington University. I served to some degree in her honor. She was one of many inspirations.

REGAN
What was it about her that inspired you? Was it …

MADELEINE (*ignoring the question*)
I wasn't sure when I was in her class if she thought much of me. She probably had no reason to. I was unsure. Inhibited. I saw, at the time, no light in the darkness.

REGAN
Madeleine, will you please allow me to finish the questions I start to ask.

MADELEINE
Haven't I been answering your questions?

REGAN
With all due respect …

MADELEINE
You're not being very respectful right now, Ms. Windsor.

REGAN
It's just that I have a particular way of conducting an interview. I'm quite good at it. So if you'll only … cooperate I know I'll have something tremendously meaningful to share with readers.

MADELEINE
You're rather sensitive on this point, aren't you?

REGAN
On what point?

MADELEINE
Control.

REGAN
It's not about control. I'm only trying to do my job. As I say, I've done hundreds of interviews in my career.

(MADELEINE lifts her cup of tea, stands. She goes to the window, looks out a moment, draws the blinds then turns around.)

MADELEINE
Very well. I apologize if I've been impeding you.

(REGAN clicks her pen closed, leans back)

REGAN
Ms. Barr. Madeleine. Don't you want to do this interview?

MADELEINE
I didn't want to. My publisher persuaded me that it would be a good idea.

REGAN
And now?

MADELEINE
You're here, aren't you?

(She sets her teacup down, with emphasis.)

I'm not trying to be difficult, Ms. Windsor. But you see I never have embraced or come to terms with notoriety. A poet laboring in obscurity outside the academy is the lot of so many of us who write as we do. I only took up poetry because I didn't possess the facility for fiction. Among my fellow MFAs I was seen as rather half-hearted. Not fully committed.

REGAN
In light of your career, your body of work, that comes as a surprise.

MADELEINE
Perhaps surprising, but it's true. I enjoyed reading poetry as a girl, but from an early age I regarded it from a distance. It seemed inaccessible, secretive. Something you appreciated well enough on the surface, as a reader, but not an actual craft that could be practiced and dedicated to. It wasn't until I got over being intimidated by the thought of creating it that I was able to do so at all.

REGAN
I think my readers will find it hard to believe … in fact, I find it hard to believe, that you could ever have been intimidated by poetry.

MADELEINE
By the prospect of writing it, yes.

REGAN
Really? So you enjoyed reading it but not writing it. At least at first.

MADELEINE
Reasonably.

REGAN
What do you mean?

MADELEINE
I mean I enjoyed it reasonably.

REGAN
Writing it?

MADELEINE
Yes.

REGAN (*glancing at her notes*)
You say you "got over" being intimidated by poetry. How?

MADELEINE (*firmly*)
By attacking it.

REGAN
Attacking it? That's a violent metaphor, if you don't mind my saying so.

MADELEINE
Well, that's how it happened. And no. I don't mind your saying so.

REGAN
All right. So you attacked. Do you remember the first poem you wrote?

MADELEINE
That I ever wrote?

REGAN
That's right.

MADELEINE
I hardly think so.

REGAN
Are you sure?

MADELEINE
Do you expect me to recite, on the spot, whatever that first poem was, Ms. Windsor?

REGAN
Well, I thought your earliest poems might have some, I don't know, sentimental significance to you?

MADELEINE
I'm afraid not. They have no more significance to me than does my first apartment or my first car.

REGAN
But you didn't create those.

MADELEINE
Create? (*She leans forward*) Ms. Windsor, what are you sentimental about?

REGAN
Our interview is about you. Not me.

MADELEINE
So you're saying "nothing."

REGAN
No (*conceding*). I'm not saying nothing. All right. (*She sets her notebook on a cushion beside her*) I'm sentimental about the people in my life. People who've come into, gone out of and even remained in my life.

(MADELEINE stands up, carries her teacup with her toward what is presumably a kitchen SR, then stops, looks back at REGAN.)

MADELEINE
But your work has no sentimental value? Your first piece for the magazine, for example?

REGAN
I remember my first piece very well. It was about an orphanage in the Bronx. I spent a month among those kids, learning about them and about the people who ran the place. I was damned proud of the story I wrote. But I wouldn't say I am sentimental over it.

MADELEINE
Yet I'm assumed to be sentimental about the first poem I wrote at the university? Or even earlier.

(Regan, frustrated, rises)

REGAN
Maybe we should take a break.

(MADELEINE walks from the kitchen door to the window as if she is going to look out again. She does not.)

MADELEINE
You're very insistent, aren't you, Ms. Windsor?

REGAN
Like I said …

MADELEINE
Yes. Just doing your job. *(A pause).* No. Let's not take a break. In fact, I've decided to oblige you.

(The tenor of her voice changes as she begins to recite, suddenly)

"In a book, many times opened, but not in a decade,
The photographs, black and white smiles and eyes of surprise,
All in mute suspension.
A pawnbroker's memories for redemption
After business hours when no one is looking.
And in a corner, by itself, with cobwebs clinging to its strings
A violin, chipped and missing its bow
But among the banished belongings
The one with a secret.
For at midnight, when the house is asleep
The violin, lord of the forgotten,
Reclaims its life and, from the past, its rosin and bow
To play again, in the attic darkness and heaven's light."

MADELEINE
I wrote that as a university freshman when I was 18. It's called "The Forgotten."

REGAN
That was your first poem?

MADELEINE
To tell you the truth, I've, perhaps ironically, forgotten.

REGAN
I like it very much.

MADELEINE
It seems very simplistic now. After all these years. I suppose the violin was a rather obvious metaphor.

REGAN
Do you remember why you chose it?

MADELEINE
Chose what?

REGAN
The violin.

MADELEINE
I chose it because of its poignancy. And because how it sounds when it breaks the silence. Not with suddenness but softly, almost undetectably at first.

(Her dreamy eyes become alert and she rises)

If you'll indulge me, Ms. Windsor, I'll demonstrate.

(MADELEINE moves to the rear of the stage where from the top drawer of a chest beneath the bookshelves she produces a violin and a bow. She carries them UPSTAGE and stands near REGAN).

I don't play much at all these days. Nevertheless.

(MADELEINE begins a slow, vaguely mournful melody on the violin. REGAN, very still on the couch, watches her and listens as the stage darkens.)

SCENE

SCENE 4: *The same*

TIME: About 15 minutes later that evening

As the scene opens both women are on their feet, back to the audience, examining a row in the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves behind the furniture.

REGAN
And you say she was Oscar Wilde's mother?

MADELEINE
Yes. She was. But that was hardly her claim to fame.

(MADELEINE draws a book from the shelf, and both women turn to face front as she opens it)

MADELEINE
She was Lady Wilde. Sometimes called Lady Jane. And she wrote under the pseudonym "Speranza."

REGAN (*touching a page of the open book*)
Jane Wilde. I'd never heard of her.

MADELEINE
Publishing under another name and being a female poet among Ireland's male hierarchy of poets, it's not likely you would have. (*She begins to turn pages in the book.*) Like those men, she was an ardent Irish nationalist. She loved her homeland fiercely. (*Still turning pages, then stopping at one.*) Ah. Here. Like them she also had an affinity for the atmospheric and the melancholy.

REGAN (*pointing at the page*)
This is a poem she wrote?

MADELEINE
Yes. It's called "La Via Dolorosa." The Way of Sorrow.

REGAN *(reading over MADELEINE'S shoulder)*

"I wander here, I wander there
Through the desert of life, all wearily;
No joy on earth for the pilgrim soul
On, on forever drearily;
O'er the mountain height
In the tempest night,
Through the mist and the gloom
We press on to the tomb,
While the death-like pall of a midnight sky
Hangs over past and futurity.
And the echo of wandering feet I hear,
And human voices and hearts are near."

(A beat)

REGAN
That's lovely.

MADELEINE
A little morbid.

(She closes the book, turns to replace it on the bookshelf)

Well, would you like that tea now, Ms. Windsor?

REGAN
All right. If it's not too much trouble.

MADELEINE
No trouble at all. *(Retrieves her own cup from the coffee table and starts toward the door, SR).* I'll only be a moment. Make yourself comfortable.

(In the interim that follows, REGAN walks slowly around the apartment, taking it in in detail in a way in which she had not done before. Having inspected the bookshelves in MADELEINE's company just moments earlier, she concentrates on knickknacks and the smaller pieces of furniture, anything that will tell her something about her subject's life and character. It is a practice REGAN has honed well over the years as a journalist, and she is good at it and good at being subtle and quiet. She picks up the violin, sets it down; gently fingers the flowers in the vase on the occasional table.)

MADELEINE'S VOICE OFFSTAGE
Would you like milk or lemon with this, Ms. Windsor?

REGAN
Ah … lemon, please. Thank you.

(When her cellphone, from her purse, begins to ring, she is startled.)

REGAN
Damn it.

(She glimpses the number on the phone, does a quick check for MADELEINE, then moves to the couch. Her expression is tense.)

REGAN *(on the phone, voice low)*
I can't talk now. I should've had my phone turned off. I'm in the middle of an interview. I told you. With the poet laureate. The uh … former poet laureate. Yes. Madeleine Barr. No, she's in another room, but I said … Yes. Yes. I know that. We need to talk. But now's not the time, Robby. All right? Hang up.

(The sound of MADELEINE approaching from another room is heard)

REGAN *(still on the phone)*
I've got to go. Goodbye.

(MADELEINE re-enters, now bearing a tray with two teacups on it)

MADELEINE
Everything all right, Ms. Windsor?

REGAN
What do you mean?

(MADELEINE sets the tray down on the coffee table)

MADELEINE
Your phone call?

REGAN
I'm sorry about that.

MADELEINE
Don't be. Mine rang earlier, remember? Well. Come and sit down and have your tea. I've discovered that it's a balm for so many of life's discomfiting moments. Slows the heartbeat.

REGAN
You overheard my call, didn't you?

MADELEINE
Not intentionally. *(She gestures that REGAN join her in sitting.)*

(REGAN moves toward the couch)

REGAN
I shouldn't have answered it.

MADELEINE
Don't worry about it.

REGAN *(still not sitting)*
It's just that it's been a long, long last twenty-four hours.

(REGAN sits down and exhales)

MADELEINE
I see. Just who is this man?

REGAN *(surprised)*
What man?

MADELEINE
The man depriving you, the "pilgrim soul" of Jane Wilde's poem, of your joy. At least over the last twenty-four hours.

REGAN
Listen, I don't want to talk about this.

MADELEINE
Why not? You might find in what I have to say some keen insight into my nature, possibly even into my elusive aesthetic. For the purposes of your story. You really can't afford not to confide in me.

REGAN (*setting down her teacup*)
I'm sorry, but I don't see what my personal life has to do with …

MADELEINE
With me? Or with interviewing me?

REGAN
With either one.

(REGAN, stands, moves to the window, pretends to look out MADELEINE, at ease by comparison, crosses her legs at the couch.)

MADELEINE
Well, it seems that if you're to understand me, it's best that we understand each other. Don't you think?

REGAN (*turning*)
All right. But then we'll also discuss your pilgrim soul.

MADELEINE
What do you mean by that?

REGAN
After I'd finished reciting that poem, you called it "morbid."

MADELEINE
Perhaps that was a reflection on your recitation.

REGAN
I don't think that was it.

(MADELEINE rises from the couch, crosses the room to the occasional table and stands by it.)

MADELEINE
Is this an example of your confident journalistic powers of observation, Ms. Windsor?

REGAN
Maybe it is.

MADELEINE
Then I have an observation of my own to make. The man on the phone. He was your lover. Or perhaps your husband. But I suspect your lover.

REGAN (*offended*)
What the hell? I only said a few words.

MADELEINE
Words are my life blood, Ms. Windsor. Rather as they are for you, though in a different way. I've learned, at great personal sacrifice, to write them down in a manner that is sincere and effectual, but I've also learned how to utilize the space between the words, which often are more important. *(A pause)* Just as I can read the silences in between words spoken.

REGAN (*unimpressed*)
Your insights aside, Madeleine, I didn't come here to discuss my private life. I don't even know you.

MADELEINE
But I'm interested.

REGAN
Whether you are or are not is immaterial. I've got a story to write and it's about you – not me.

(The two women stand closer together.)

MADELEINE
So what I said about understanding each other …

REGAN (*her voice rising*)
I think you know me well enough. I'm Regan Windsor. From the New Amsterdam Magazine. I'm 35 years old. All right. That you didn't know. Now you do. You want more? I live in Greenwich Village. I'm an inveterate reader. I have a relationship that I care about, and it's in trouble and it's kicking my ass. (*Her voice begins to break, and she quickly looks away, into her notes.*)

MADELEINE
Ms. Windsor?

REGAN (*rallying*)
Look. (*She looks back up at MADELEINE.*) I felt … provoked there for a moment.

MADELEINE
I provoked you?

REGAN
You did.

MADELEINE
Then I apologize.

REGAN
I shouldn't have lost my cool. It's not very professional.

MADELEINE
Well, you're a human being, Ms. Windsor. You … may I call you Regan?

REGAN (*uncertainly*)
Uh, if you want.

MADELEINE
I want. To tell you the truth, Regan. Lately I find myself missing the conversation with, if not the companionship of, intelligent women such as you.

(*She goes to her bookcase, grazes with her fingertips the spines of books randomly.*)

These publishing people who consume so much of my life, they're mostly businessmen and accountants and publicists, and they frankly bore the hell out of me. Much too much the past few months I've felt … isolated. (*She smiles.*) Rather like Lady Wilde among the angry young men.

REGAN
Is that why you pulled that book of her poetry off the shelf?

MADELEINE
You read too much into things.

REGAN
You say you feel isolated. What about your friends?

MADELEINE
What about them?

REGAN
You must have some women friends. Are you bored by them as well?

MADELEINE
Not all of them.

(*She moves to the couch, sits on the back of it.*)

The problem is, we don't have that much to say to one another that we haven't said many times before.

REGAN
I don't see you as a lonely person, Madeleine. You seem, well, comfortable with yourself.

MADELEINE
Psychoanalysis? Must we?

REGAN
I've looked at your itineraries for the past six months to a year. You travel the country. You give lectures. You read your work for audiences and scholars. Maybe I'm being presumptuous, but you appear to have a very full life.

MADELEINE
You are being presumptuous, Regan, and you don't know what you're talking about.

REGAN
I only meant to say …

MADELEINE
My so-called "itineraries" are not my life.

REGAN
All right then. I'm sorry for over-stepping.

MADELEINE
I don't think you are sorry.

REGAN
I said I was.

MADELEINE
Yes. You "said" you were.

REGAN (*getting up*)
I can't understand why you're upset. You over-stepped yourself a few minutes ago. About my phone call.

MADELEINE (*standing, backing toward the door*)
Then we've both done enough over-stepping for one night, don't you think?

REGAN
This interview's not over.

MADELEINE
I'm afraid it is.

REGAN
I haven't finished, Madeleine.

(*MADELEINE grasps the doorknob and pulls open the door.*)

MADELEINE
Thank you for coming, Regan. Don't forget your things.

REGAN
Listen, let's cool down and start over.

MADELEINE
Not tonight. Ms. Windsor. I'm quite tired. Tomorrow evening. Around the same time. Now goodbye.

(*Reluctantly, and a little shaken, REGAN gathers her purse and her notes and starts toward the door that MADELEINE stands beside. When she gets there,*

the two women exchange tense expressions before REGAN exits. MADELEINE closes the door softly.

After a beat, MADELEINE crosses the stage, begins to gather up the teacups and saucers. She stops, and, still holding them, sinks down onto the sofa. She sets the dishes down, looks straight ahead._

MADELEINE (*speaking as if in a daze*)
My sweet Kenneth: I have forgotten how to pray. But I know somehow you can hear me. You're in in my heart, son, and you always will be.

Losing you is still, still so very hard. But I'm strong, Kenneth, because you were strong. You were strong your whole life. We share that strength.

My sweet memories of you and of us together fill my emptiness and, yes, give me joy and comfort. What happened twenty years ago can never change that.

(She turns, sets down her pen, and rises slowly from her chair. MADELEINE'S eyes close; her head bows.)

MADELEINE
Never, never.

(At this, light falls upstage behind MADELEINE. Very slowly, from SR to SL, a procession begins. The low sound of a dirge is heard. Six human figures, all of them appearing to be completely covered in ashes like those on the streets below the fallen Twin Towers, cross the stage behind her. When they have gone, she raises her head skyward.)

SCENE

SCENE 5: *REGAN's apartment on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village*

TIME: Later that evening, around 10

AT RISE: We see, as before, the bed in the middle of the room. A door SL swings open and REGAN enters, followed by ROBERT.

ROBERT
I still don't know why you're so upset.

REGAN
I'm not upset.

ROBERT
Well, you're angry about something. It's only 9:30 and we're home already.

REGAN
Robby, that guy was hitting on me.

ROBERT
He was not.

REGAN
You don't think I know when I'm being hit on? Jesus. You're blind.

ROBERT
He asked you if we were using the other chair.

REGAN
And he licked his lips at me.

ROBERT
He did not.

REGAN
He did too. Why are you defending the creep?

ROBERT
Regan. I was turned all the way around in my chair. I saw the whole exchange.

REGAN
Evidently, you didn't see the whole exchange.

(She slams her purse down on the bed.)

Oh, fuck it anyway.

ROBERT
What IS the matter? You've been in a shitty mood ever since you got back from that interview. What happened?

REGAN
Nothing. *(She shakes her head.)* Nothing. Let's just go to bed.

ROBERT
At 9:30?

(REGAN turns back the blankets down on the bed.)

REGAN
You're not obligated to come to bed with me, you know.

ROBERT
Obligated?

REGAN
That's right.

(REGAN straightens up, begins to fuss with her clothes as if to undress.)

ROBERT
Hold on a minute.

REGAN
What?

ROBERT
Regan.

(He grasps her elbow and leads her to the front of the bed; they both sit at the foot.)

Are you still angry because I called you while you were working today? I said I was sorry about that.

REGAN
That's not it.

ROBERT
Then what is it?

REGAN (*calmer*)
I didn't even finish the interview tonight.

ROBERT
So?

REGAN
I mean I didn't finish it because she basically kicked me out.

ROBERT
This poet?

REGAN
Madeleine Barr.

ROBERT
What do you mean she kicked you out?

REGAN
Kicked me out. Told me to leave. Threw open the door.

ROBERT
Why? What happened?

REGAN
You really want to know?

ROBERT
Yeah.

REGAN
Because I called her on her bullshit.

ROBERT
What do you mean?

(REGAN stands, fold her arms)

REGAN
Robby, the whole interview this woman was trying to put me on the defensive. Asking ME questions. Not answering mine by turning them on me.

ROBERT
And this is something you've never dealt with before?

REGAN
All I said was she didn't seem like a lonely person leading a lonely life. That's when she got her back up. (*REGAN paces.*) It's not like things were going smoothly before that. It was like a performance up there in that flat. The way she uses this florid language, and makes her literary references. And pontificates.

ROBERT *(still seated at the edge of the bed)*
She's a poet. Isn't that what poets do?

REGAN
That's what this poet does. It's insufferable. But even so, I didn't intend to offend her. I was trying to, to cut through all the semantics, all the allusions and … oh, what's the point?

ROBERT
All right, this Madeleine Barr is a pain. So what?

REGAN
Yes. A pain. (*REGAN pauses in thought.*) No. No, she's not a pain. She's complicated. I should have known she would be. I know I've interviewed writers, even poets, before, but, but no one like this.

ROBERT
Like what?

REGAN
You know she recited this poem she wrote when she was a college student? Something symbolic about a violin. And then she played for me.

ROBERT
The violin, you mean?

REGAN
Yes.

(REGAN settles down onto the edge of the bed beside him.)

Did I tell you that her son was killed on 9/11?

ROBERT
No. How?

REGAN
He was working in one of the towers. He never got out.

ROBERT
She tell you that?

REGAN
No. I knew about it going in.

ROBERT
Did you ask her about it?

REGAN (*surprised*)
No! There was no way, no reason to ask her about it. (*She bows her head.*) Maybe I should have. Maybe I would have if I'd stayed. I feel like there was something between us, Robby. Something unspoken. With all the gamesmanship in that living room something wasn't being said. By her. I don't know. By both of us.

ROBERT
About her son being killed?

REGAN
Possibly. Anyway, she told me to come back tomorrow night.

ROBERT
For another interview?

REGAN
To finish this one.

ROBERT
Really? Is this Madeleine Barr worth two interviews?

REGAN
I haven't even had one.

ROBERT
What was today?

REGAN
I'm not sure what you'd call it. But it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

(She looks him in the eyes.)

Look, would you mind going home?

ROBERT
You want me to leave? Just like that?

REGAN
Yeah. I do.

ROBERT
Hey, I'll go to sleep at 9:30 if you really want to.

REGAN
Didn't you hear me? I want you to go.

ROBERT
Ray, don't turn this Madeleine Barr thing into something about you and me.

REGAN
It's not about you and me. It's something entirely different. I don't want to deal with it now.

ROBERT
We don't have to deal with it. Let's just go to bed.

REGAN
No.

ROBERT (*leaning in*)
I don't want to leave you.

REGAN (*stern*)
Really? It's going to be like this?

(ROBERT rises from the edge of the bed)

ROBERT
Okay. I'll go. But we'll talk tomorrow. Right?

REGAN
Yeah.

ROBERT
You sure? I mean, I won't bother you if you don't want me to.

REGAN
Do whatever.

ROBERT
Goddamnit, Ray. Talk to me.

REGAN
Get out of here, Robby. Please?

(She falls back onto the bed)

ROBERT
Regan?

(She does not answer)

Hey?

(She falls back on the bed, looks up at ceiling)

What are you doing?

REGAN (*dreamily*)
I'm walking on leaves.

SCENE

SCENE 6: *MADELEINE's apartment*

TIME: Shortly before 6 the following evening

AT RISE: There is a rapping at the apartment door, SR. The living room is quickly illuminated

REGAN'S VOICE
Madeleine? It's Regan Windsor again.

(MADELEINE crosses SR and opens the door)

MADELEINE
Ms. Windsor. I wasn't certain you'd return.

REGAN
You asked me to.

MADELEINE
I suppose I did.

REGAN
May I come in? Just for a few minutes?

(*MADELEINE widens the door; REGAN enters*)

REGAN
Thank you.

MADELEINE
If you're here to apologize for yesterday, you already did that. I accepted your apology.

REGAN
No. I'm here to finish our interview.

MADELEINE
I thought we had finished.

REGAN
We didn.t

(*MADELEINE crosses to center of the room; REGAN follows*)

MADELEINE
Well, I don't know that I have any more to tell you.

REGAN
Please. Just a few more questions.

MADELEINE
I'm very busy this evening.

REGAN
You invited me.

MADELEINE
The fact of the matter is, I'm … struggling with a poem. I've been struggling with it for some time.

REGAN
I see.

MADELEINE
No you don't see. This is a particularly important work to me.

(*MADELEINE pauses*)

It's for my son.

REGAN
Your son who …

MADELEINE
Yes. My son who was killed on September 11th. Twenty years ago this year. Kenneth was a young broker with Marsh & McLennan. He had an office on the 94th floor of the North Tower.

(*MADELEINE sits down on the couch and in a moment REGAN joins her*)

You knew all of this. I'm sure you did your research before coming to speak with me.

(*REGAN nods, silent*)

MADELEINE
In any event, I appreciate your not making that part of your inquiry.

REGAN
Of course not. But …

MADELEINE
What is it?

REGAN
Just between you and me, and for no one else: Could you tell me about the poem?

MADELEINE
There isn't much to tell. As I said, I'm struggling. All I can tell you for now is the title. "Value."

REGAN
"Value." Madeleine. Would you tell me about your son?

MADELEINE
Why?

REGAN
I told you. Not for publication.

MADELEINE
Then why do you want to know about him?

REGAN
Would you? Please?

(*MADELEINE takes her time before responding)*

MADELEINE
You're going under the assumption that learning something about Kenneth will teach you something about me? You're not fooling anyone, Ms. Windsor.

REGAN
Maybe that's part of it. But not all of it.

MADELEINE
You're here to finish the interview, as you said. Not simply to talk with me.

REGAN
I can't do both at the same time?

MADELEINE
Not without my son being in your story.

REGAN
Would that be so terrible? Don't you want people to know about him?

(*MADELEINE rises from the couch, moves to the bookshelves, stops*)

MADELEINE
He's been gone for 20 years.

REGAN
That doesn't diminish his life.

MADELEINE
I'm the only one who remembers. I mean who really remembers Kenneth. He had no family of his own. He never had the chance to marry. He never had the chance to do many things.

REGAN (*from the couch*)
And his father?

MADELEINE
His father remarried twice after Kenneth was born. He had four more children. All sons.

REGAN
But he had a relationship with Kenneth?

MADELEINE
Not like mine. I was divorced from his father when he was only 7. Sydney remarried a year and a half later and moved to Chicago. I raised Kenneth essentially by myself. It was difficult at times. But it was a joy. His father was

half a country away and I was teaching at the university, but he was a happy child. We were happy together.

(MADELEINE moves SR.)

Don't misunderstand, Ms. Windsor. I was not an overbearing, possessive mother. A tortured matriarch out of O'Neill or Tennessee Williams. I loved Kenneth, but I wanted him to be independent and free-minded as soon as he was old enough to do so. Not that I had to worry. He'd no sooner begun high school than was he thinking about the next level, and a career. *(She smiles.)* Then came Columbia. But even though he remained in the city, he was fully autonomous. I paid his tuition, but only the first year. After that he won a scholarship on merit, and he worked his way through the rest.

REGAN
He sounds like a remarkable young man.

MADELEINE
He was. I was very proud of him.

(REGAN stands)

REGAN
Tell me something. Do you ever dream about your son?

MADELEINE
All the time. Mostly I dream about him as a child. Not as he was when I lost him. I dream about how I would read to him at bedtime. He'd sit up, against his pillow, his eyes big and wide, and he'd listen. Not saying a word. Just listening. And I dream sometimes of us walking in the sand on the Jersey shore. His feet sank into the sand and he'd jump up to free himself and he'd laugh, and I'd laugh. We'd watch the birds at the water's edge and when they flew away try to re-create the little imprints they made in the sand with their feet. Those days at the beach I dream about. I dream about them a lot.

(*MADELEINE returns to the couch and sits down.*)

Now. Perhaps you'll tell me why you care so much.

REGAN
About what?

MADELEINE
About these dreams of mine.

REGAN (*fumbling with her notes and pen*)
We can continue with the interview now if you like.

MADELEINE
What I'd like is for you to tell me the truth.

REGAN
I don't know what you're talking about.

MADELEINE
Don't you?

REGAN
Madeleine …

(*MADELEINE takes her hand*)

MADELEINE
Tell me.

REGAN
Madeleine, if you don't want to resume the interview, I won't press you.

(*REGAN starts to get up from the couch, frees her hand*)

I have to be somewhere else anyway.

(*MADELEINE stares up at her.*)

MADELEINE
Regan?

(REGAN turns her back on MADELEINE, walks slowly SL, stops)

REGAN
I had a baby when I was 17. A son. I gave him up for adoption.

(*MADELEINE watches in silence from the sofa*)

I really had no choice. I was about to go to college. The boy who was the father? He knew, but he ran off with some friends to Europe when I was six months' pregnant. My parents were split up. My mother wasn't very well. I was young and I was frightened. I thought I could be a mother myself when I first found out. Somehow I saw the pregnancy through. But when the time came to be a mother -- REALLY a mother -- I didn't know how to be one. I wasn't ready. I … I couldn't do it.

MADELEINE
As you said. You were young.

REGAN
I was scared of that baby. (*She turns around.*) I thought I'd do the wrong things, I'd hurt him accidentally. I'd fuck it up.

(*MADELEINE begins to speak, but doesn't get the chance.*)

REGAN
But that wasn't it. Not really. It wasn't fear I'd do everything wrong. It was fear I wouldn't get the life I wanted. College. Graduate school. A job, a really good job, a career. Being a journalist. Writing about the world I wanted to be

so damned much a part of. I wanted to be me. Me and no one else. (*She bows her head.*) So I let him go. Almost right away. They told me it was better that way, safer. I wouldn't get attached, they said, I wouldn't have time to change my mind, I'd just do it. And my baby would get a happy home with a real mother. With parents who wanted him and would love him.

(*REGAN moves toward the couch, braces herself against it.*)

I went to school and I studied and I got one job, then another and another, and then everything was good, everything was what I wanted it to be. The world I wanted. But not long ago I started to have this feeling. This feeling that everything wasn't good.

(*She sits on the arm of the sofa, looks at MADELEINE. Her hand goes to her face.*)

I dream sometimes, too, about my son. The son I never knew. Sometimes I wonder where he is.

(*REGAN begins to cry.*)

MADELEINE (*leaning toward her*)
You didn't arrange to stay in touch with the foster parents?

REGAN (*shaking head bitterly*)
No. I didn't think I'd want to.

MADELEINE
I'm sorry.

REGAN
Don't say that.

MADELEINE
But I am. I didn't mean to put you through this.

(*MADELEINE eases REGAN onto the couch and puts her arms around her.*)

Now I think I understand, my dear. Why you wanted to know about Kenneth.

REGAN
I know it's not the same. You lost your son.

MADELEINE
What's not the same?

REGAN
The pain.

MADELEINE (*patting her*)
Pain is pain, Regan.

(*REGAN makes an effort to compose herself, sitting up, rubbing hard at the tears on her face.*)

REGAN
Can you forget that all of this just happened, Madeleine?

MADELEINE
No. Can you?

(*REGAN gets to her feet.*)

REGAN
Maybe I should go. For good this time.

MADELEINE (*standing*)
Would you like to hear my poem? What I have so far?

REGAN
The poem about Kenneth?

MADELEINE (*nods*)
It's in my desk.

REGAN
Are you sure?

MADELEINE
I'd like to read it to you.

(*MADELEINE goes to her desk, opens the top drawer, emerges with a paper.*)

This is my second attempt and I'm far from happy with it. But I'm determined. I know I have a long way to go.

(*MADELEINE reads her poem*)

"Her next thought: What do I do with the hole
In my heart, the one darkness rushes through?
Do I let them explain, let them console
Let them caress, let them pray as they do?

"Or in the private consolation of solitude,
The mirror in her daybreak eyes –
The blue-gray, the piquancy of time
The reflection and the affirmation

"Does she unmistakably, unassailably value
The visible lightness and the dream?"

REGAN
I don't know what to say.

MADELEINE
It's not my best. It's far from my best. But it will be. Soon.

REGAN
I wouldn't change a word.

MADELEINE (*folding the poem*)
No. I want more of my son in this, and less of me who is left behind.

REGAN
I believe he's already there.

MADELEINE
Thank you.

(*REGAN gathers her purse and notepad from the sofa.*)

REGAN
I should go. It's been a very long day.

MADELEINE
And you have a story to write.

REGAN (*clutching her things*)
Yes I do. But not tonight.

(*MADELEINE crosses SR toward the door*)

MADELEINE
I hope to read it someday.

REGAN
Will you?

(*MADELEINE opens the door; REGAN is behind her.*)

MADELEINE
I just might.

REGAN
Thank you, Madeleine. I mean that.

MADELEINE
Goodbye, Regan.

(*REGAN steps by her, toward the open door.*)

Remember Lady Wilde. Keep fighting the good fight.

(*As REGAN exits, MADELEINE closes the door behind her.)*

(*MADELEINE crosses SL to the table in front of the couch, picks up the teacups, pauses, sets them down. She moves upstage to where she has left the violin, stands over it, plucks one of the strings with her fingers. Finally, she picks up the uncompleted "Value" poem again.)*

MADELEINE (*reciting*)
"Her next thought … how she shall love."

(MADELEINE folds the poem again, sets it down and then moves SL into the bedroom. There, she adjusts the light and sits down on the side of the bed. Facing the audience she takes a deep breath and then sinks down, on her back, onto the bed.)

(The sound of a violin playing, the same tune MADELEINE played before is heard. The stage lights dim. After a few moments, the sound of the violin stops. MADELEINE sits up slowly on the bed and just as slowly elevates her arms toward the ceiling as though reaching. A lone spotlight falls on her and then the stage lights fade out completely to blackness.)

END OF PLAY

Whether in the face of grief, a family legacy of addiction, a pandemic or a love that seems just out of reach, those inhabiting this collection of short fiction and drama are steeled by bravery and hope. They share a dream that will carry them above the storm.

David Coddon is a Southern California-based fiction writer, longtime journalist and theater critic. His previous novels include: *The Romancer*, *There and Back Again*, *In Violet* and *The Redeemers*. He has also published under the name Barrett McCloud two anthologies of short stories: *Raining in Paradise* and *Blue Tomorrow*.

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